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# Truly Madly, Deeply Madly

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by Hairee Lee

Sylvia receives a last minute email from Babs saying she can't attend the classical music concert with her tomorrow. Would Sylvia like to pick up the tickets at, say, six so that she can attend the concert with someone else?

Sylvia and Babs met in a continuing studies class at a local college—Contemporary Music Appreciation—and discovered their mutual love for the London Symphony Orchestra. Every few weeks or so they ride the tube together from the Finchley Road Station to the Barbican to watch Prokofiev, Purcell, Elgar, Beethoven, Monteverdi, Rachmaninov, Gershwin, whatever happens to be on the program at the time. For a couple of hours at a concert, the uniform silence of a large group of people paying attention, *paying* to pay attention, to a single point of interest, makes Sylvia feel as if they each belong to one another, or more accurately, to her.

At Babs's home on Queen's Grove in St John's Wood, a very lovely part of London, Richard answers the door. Sylvia wonders if he's been standing behind it, waiting. He looks flushed and his eyes dart about. Babs is running late, he says.

From a distance, Babs and Richard, both in their early forties, make a handsome couple: she a petit waif with a hazelnut face and a conservative bob of

fine beige hair, he a perennially khaki-and-button-down-shirt clad man with a decent build and tall frame. Closer, Babs looks birdlike with a frenetic way of speaking that makes her sound like her vocal chords are always straining at the upper end of her treble range. Because she gesticulates when she speaks, one cannot help but notice the knobby joints between the arthritic arrangement of her fingers. It reminds Sylvia of chicken feet, the old maid in the gingerbread house, decline.

Curious still, Babs and Richard are *not* a couple. The brother and sister live together, cook meals for each other, work at the same university library, launder each other's clothes, open each other's mail (bills mostly), and share a joint account. Sylvia is fairly certain they are virgins.

Sylvia takes off her glove to check the time, but realizes that she forgot to put on her watch. Impatience makes her nearly sigh aloud.

It's Thursday. Sylvia is scheduled to rendezvous with Sean—Irish, handsome, law enforcement officer Sean—at eight o'clock at her apartment. She has bought him a box of chocolates shaped like miniature knobs from a sex shop in Soho. It is uncharacteristic of Sylvia to do anything extra for her lovers, particularly in this weather, but Sean cancelled the week before. He did not even pretend at an excuse. What bothered Sylvia more was not that he didn't explain—in fact, had he done so, she would have likely become impatient and wondered at his motives when they shared a tacit agreement to owe each other nothing beyond her bedroom—but that she had suffered anxiety. She would never admit his cancellation as a slight against her ego. So she feels the weight of the candy in her purse with ill-defined resentment.

Richard asks if she'd like to wait inside. Sylvia would rather not, but the meteorologists seem to have gotten it right for once—it is actually snowing in London and in increasing volume.

Richard stoops in that way some tall people, usually women, do, curling in his shoulders as if apologizing for his bones. Sylvia thinks he could have been attractive with his dark hair and bright blue eyes behind wire-rimmed glasses. Unfortunately, his queer and sad unawareness of his assets, his painful shyness that overstrains the muscles around his eyes and cheeks, gives him a look of a man in agony, nullifying any quality of magnetism afforded him by the happy and neglected accident of his genes.

Their semi-detached two-story house is on a fairly posh, quiet street lined with centuries old trees and pruned bushes. When Sylvia steps inside, Richard waves to the sofa. She perches on one end, leaving her coat on.

The living room is tastefully decorated with one long wall of built-in mahogany shelves filled with books. The floor space in front of the shelves is taken up by more books. Neat piles of journals keep them company. Three knee-high stacks of the *Guardian* and *Observer Magazine* are nearest to where Sylvia sits. The date on one of them is over three years old. They do, however, appear to have been read. An enormous grandfather clock stands in one corner of the room—it says five to six—behind the aubergine colored velveteen sofa. Beside the curtain-drawn bay windows, on the other side of the room, is an upright piano. The keyboard is exposed. On the coffee table are more magazines and an open book, faced down, *Madame Bovary*, and a mismatched collection of coasters strewn willy-nilly. Oddly—odd because

neither of the residents smoke or drink—an ashtray made of unpolished quartz rests on the table, filled with wine corks.

Sylvia makes no effort to relieve the silence though she knows that Richard does not know how. Irritation makes her ungenerous. She watches him squirm, standing in the middle of the living room, unable to speak, unable to sit, unable to decide. Watching him struggle, she finds herself enjoying it and takes off her coat and stores her gloves in the pockets. Richard's infatuation with her is a foregone conclusion and having her alone with him in the same room seems too much for the virgin to bear. Yet he is unable to leave the room or dissolve into the carpet. The awareness soothes Sylvia's bruised ego like a balm. Several more moments pass in delicious, awkward silence.

"Would you like some wine?" he says abruptly.

She looks at him, tilting her head. "Wine?"

"White," he says.

Through the closed kitchen door on her left, she hears him struggling to remove the cork and wash and dry the glasses. She pulls out a Benson & Hedges from her purse and lights it. Several noisy minutes later he walks into the room with an overfilled glass of white wine.

"Aren't you going to join me?" she says, deliberately trailing her gaze from the glass at level with his groin up to his face. He looks away, too late to hide his flush, pretending to be occupied with pulling down the sleeves of his jumper.

"I don't like to lose control."

"I guess I'll lose control alone then. Chin, chin."

She takes a sip and another longer sip.

And then pulls a long drag from her cigarette.

Richard stares at her openly now. The blue of his

eyes practically glitter behind his glasses. She looks away, disconcerted by their brightness, and stares instead at the long cylinder of ash forming between her fingers. Again, she looks down at her wrist.

“Bugger.”

“Do you mind? The language,” says Richard with a hard edge to his voice.

She stares at him.

“How’s the wine?” he asks, after clearing his throat.

She shrugs and says fine.

“I think it’s the same kind that you brought to Hyde Park,” he says reminding her of an outdoor concert that she and Babs had attended, Richard joining them unexpectedly.

“Oh? I don’t remember.”

Sylvia leans over to tap her cigarette into the ash-tray full of wine corks. Almost lunging, Richard scoops out the corks just before the ash falls into the tray. He kneels on the rug and sets down his treasure carefully on the corner of the coffee table farthest from Sylvia.

“You don’t mind me smoking, do you?”

She looks at him lazily through the smoke.

“It was a Riesling,” he says fingering one of the corks. “The other white wine.”

If she didn’t know better, Sylvia would have thought he was being funny. She turns to look at the Grandfather clock behind her. Five to six.

“It’s only five to six, by the way,” he says. “What’s your hurry?”

And though Richard has nothing to do with the memory, Sylvia recalls her mother, on the rare occasion she had time for her daughter, teaching her to read a clock made of a paper plate and take-out chopsticks,

one snapped in half for the short hand. She was six. Long hand at twelve, short hand at one, then two, then three. One o'clock, two o'clock, three. "See?" her mother said, looking at the digital clock on the stove, and then saying, "Where the hell is he?" The lesson, forgotten. Five to six: long hand at eleven, short hand at six.

"It was either that or the vintage I saw you drinking with your date on Monday," he says and holds up another cork from the pile.

She doesn't understand immediately.

"I saw you at Grafton Pub. Monday? Supper?" he says.

"I didn't see you."

The hard edge in Richard's voice returns. "No. You *don't*."

Sylvia stares at the corks now and she tries to count them.

"He's just a bloke," she says deliberately, lightly. "A mate from uni." The muscles between her shoulder blades pull together.

"A *mate*." Richard spits out the words. "Is that how you kiss *mates*?"

A forgotten memory: Richard walking by happenstance while she waited at the bus stop as usual for Babs. *Oh, hullo! What are you doing here! Oh! A concert! Here!*—taking out a chocolate bar from his trouser pocket and thrusting it at her so that Sylvia grabbed it to keep it from hitting her chest—*I was walking home from work! And bought it at the store!* Looking at his shortening form as he walked away, she noticed the absence of a work bag or briefcase. Then she forgot about him.

"Well? Is it? Like... like some slapper." Then he slaps his thigh hard and says, "Sorry. It's just you

know what they say. Keep your *enemies* closer. Not so much your *mates*. People could get the wrong idea.”

She puts down her glass and looks again at her bare wrist.

Another memory: seeing Richard at the local Sainsbury's, local for Sylvia. She spotted him in the cereal aisle with a box of Wheatabix in his hand and kept going, not wanting to endure an awkward conversation, which was inevitable with Richard. She saw in her peripheral vision his head turn.

“What time is it?” She stands and her body tips, but she catches herself on the arm of the sofa. “Bugger.”

“I said you shouldn't swear.”

*Piss off*, says Sylvia, but only in her mind because her tongue is a slab of lead.

“You should sit down.”

And she sits down as she's told, but against her will. Her lips stitch together and the wine glass, which she looks at fixedly, is filled with the weight of all the wine in the kingdom. It's a wonder she did not drop it before. It could flood the entire neighborhood. There are little atoms of white settling in gravity-defying slowness to the bottom of the glass, each particle, paradoxically, weighing whole worlds.

She does not see Richard bending down to take the still lit cigarette from her fingers and put it out in the ash tray. But she can hear him talking some distance away.

“Your body starts to make promises, Sylvia. However much you try to keep the heart and body divided, the interface is porous. Eventually, if you repeat the act of making love often enough, whether you think of it as love making or not, *nature trumps will*. The

heart, even yours, begins to sway to the rhythms of the body. Its longings and its satisfactions, its hopes. I couldn't let you go on making those promises to *them*."

The last words were but the faintest echoes from miles away.

"Don't you see? The act *becomes* you."

\* \* \*

When she regains consciousness, Sylvia is on the sofa. Her arms are extended to either side of her over the top of the back cushions. A complex system of tension cords pin her wrists to the sofa and connect her wrists to her ankles. When she tries to pull down her arms, her feet get tugged under her, and when she tries to rise, the chords stick hard into her wrists. The only light is from the table lamp to her left that casts deep shadows into all corners of the room.

"You're awake," says a voice from one of these corners.

The sound of music, one note then another, issues from the piano.

"Richard?" C-major arpeggio. "What the hell is going on?" Her head throbs.

Crashing G-minor chord. "Really, Sylvia, it makes me uncomfortable when you swear."

She says, staring in the direction of the piano, "Try tension chords." Her tone is cool and condescending. "Get these things off me, Richard."

He moves out of the shadows to stand six feet from her; Richard seems to wilt a little under her iron gaze.

"I just want to talk to you," he says, brows knitted.

"Get these things off me, Richard."



“*You* walked in here.” It almost sounds as if he’s pleading.

“Kidnapping to *talk*?” she says incredulously.

“I never forced you to come inside, I didn’t force you to come.”

Richard stands sideways to her to keep from having to make eye contact.

“I didn’t force you to come?”—enunciating every word—“I wanted to *talk* to you? And so that must mean I wanted you to *drug* me? *And tie me up?*” Sylvia’s tone nears hysteria.

Richard pulls on his index finger as if to pull it off his hand.

Lowering the volume of her voice she says, “Untie me, Richard.”

He whispers, begging, “*I can’t. I love you.*”

As a girl, Sylvia watched her mother bring home men who would come out of her bedroom early in the morning before her mother could notice them leave. Sylvia waited in the living room. She wanted to watch them tip toe, let them know that someone witnessed their exit. Some didn’t even pretend to be friendly and left without a word. When her mother awoke, she would cry over the stove as she fried Sylvia’s eggs. Why couldn’t she ever keep one with her? her mother had often cried.

“Untie me, Richard.” And then, “Untie me, Richard. Untie me. Richard, untie me! Right now! Untie me, right now! Untie me, Richard!” She yells, “I have someone expecting me, Richard, and when I don’t show up he’s going to know something’s wrong and then he’ll come looking for me!”

Up until that point Richard has been pacing in random lines around the room, from one corner to the sofa to the curtains to the other wall to the shelf

and back again, but at Sylvia's last remark, he stops, looking at her askance.

"Who? Sean?" He doesn't wait for her to answer. "That's who you see on Thursdays, isn't it?"

He crosses the room, picks up her purse by her feet, and rummages inside.

"What are you doing?" she says.

"Texting Sean."

"What are you writing?" she shrieks.

He puts her phone back into her purse and sets it down by her foot again.

"He won't believe it. I've never cancelled on him before. He'll be suspicious. He's a police officer."

He resumes his pacing and runs his fingers through his hair several times so violently Sylvia feels the tug on her own roots.

"There's always a first time," Richard mumbles.

"Even if you manage to trick him, how do you expect to hide me from Babs? She'll be here any minute..." Sylvia's voice trails off as a thought occurs to her.

Richard stops pacing, slips his hands into his pockets, and looks up at the ceiling.

"Babs doesn't know I'm here," she says.

Richard drops his head and looks down at his feet.

"There's no concert tomorrow."

He licks his lips and shrugs his shoulders, bending his neck right then left like a boxer going through his pre-fight tics. The gesture, schizophrenically uncharacteristic, disturbs Sylvia like nothing else that night, not even discovering she'd been drugged, not even waking up bound.

"Where is she?"

"You know that when I hate you, it is because I love you to a point of passion that unhinges my soul.

Have you heard that one?”

“Where is she?”

“On a plane.”

Then and only then does escape become a vague necessity in Sylvia’s mind. It comes hand in hand with the now first detectable fumes of terror. Where incredulity and exasperation had been her guiding emotion, survival becomes uncertain. She isn’t yet fully afraid, but for the first time that night she can foresee a future, the real possibility, of danger.

“Florida. For her arthritis and the chemo.”

“America?”

“For the warmer climate.”

An image of Babs’s claw-like hands flashes in Sylvia’s mind and she feels remorse. She didn’t know, she says.

“How could you? You’re selfish, Sylvia.”

Sylvia laughs. Loudly and it feels wonderful. The sound makes her feel more powerful because the scorn in it reminds her of her anger.

“Don’t laugh. It’s true. You *are* selfish. But I love you anyways.”

Sylvia laughs louder, throwing her head back.

Richard takes two long quick steps and strikes her cheek. When Sylvia regains focus, she sees his face very close to hers peering at her with apology. He has dropped to his knees, putting his hand on her leg and he says he’s sorry. The blue of his eye pushed to the very limits of its circumference. His pupils were like two gigantic holes on his face.

“When Babs finds out, and she will find out—”

“The truth? What’s the truth except that I love you?” He sighs and says, “I know about your other men. I’ve been following... making sure you’re all right. Mondays, Thursdays, and Saturdays. Always

Mondays, Thursdays, Saturdays.” His expression is stern, but tender. In a low voice he says, “You’re a slutty, dirty, slutty slut. But I know you’re better than that, Sylvia. I love you. I could *love* you.”

“You missed Tuesday,” says Sylvia in a cool, lying hiss.

Sylvia watches Richard’s upper lip twitch. He moves his hands to his side, but remains genuflected.

“You don’t have a Tuesday.” His voice is too defiant.

“You know nothing.”

He changes tactics. “You’re out of touch, Sylvia. Out of touch with what you need. Why are you so afraid of love? Do you know what they do when they leave you? One goes home to his wife, another goes to a strip club by Camden, and another always stops by Burger King and gluts himself with crap. These men don’t know the meaning of worship, of loving you, and keeping themselves pure and clean and innocent for you. All they want is to get their knobs in your cunt and pretend that *you* love them. Of course, you don’t love any of them. You’re afraid to love. Isn’t that it? I guessed the truth? But you’re looking at the wrong men for salvation! *I* know that’s what you want, to be saved from your fear. To be *delivered* into love. I’m pure, Sylvia. I am innocent. I would be faithful. I would never betray you.”

He places his hand just above her lap and moves his palms slowly up the length of her thigh without touching her.

“Do you think I don’t know why you go to these concerts? No one adulterates your experience or your personality or your independence. That’s what you want in love, isn’t it? That’s what you want in love. I can do that for you, Sylvia.” His face is now so close she can see the pores on his nose. Leaning so that his

lips are by her ear, he says, "I don't even have to touch you."

Twice, her mother dated men who returned and even stayed for eggs over the course of several months, and Sylvia watched her mother dye her hair and lose twenty pounds for one of them and leave Sylvia for a week while she went to Biarritz with another when Sylvia was twelve. But they all left her in the end. And for months her mother would weep, lying in bed or slouched in the arm chair in front of the living room window and smoke several packs of cigarettes over the course of the day. Love made women like her mother messy. Sylvia looked at her mother's broken form and felt only disgust and determination not to be that sort of woman.

And though his proposal is ludicrous, Richard himself probably insane, Sylvia can see beauty and solace in it. He would be devoted to her from a distance, devoted to her as she saw him capable of devotion with Babs. The one man who had ever told her he would never try to get in her pants would be the one man who could take care of her heart.

"Kiss me," she says.

He looks at her suspiciously. He cannot conceal the quick glance at her lips. It's the same kind of glance shot at an abandoned cocktail by an alcoholic, tormented by fear and yearning. She tells him to kiss her again and he shakes his head. I want you to, she tells him. I want you to, she tells him again. With his mouth ajar, his shallow breaths lingering nauseatingly around her face, he puts his mouth on hers. He pulls away quickly for a moment as if she burned him. In the next instant, he crushes his face against hers bruising the inside of her mouth with her incisors. He screams and falls backwards when she bites his upper lip.

His fingers are covered in blood when he looks down at them after touching them to his mouth.

“You slut!”

Expecting another blow, Sylvia shuts her eyes. But instead she hears Richard stand. He picks up her wine glass from the coffee table and sends it flying over her head. It shatters against the wall beside the grandfather clock that says five to six. Hoisting the heavy quartz ashtray with her lone cigarette butt inside, he pivots to his right and throws it on the coffee table. It lands with a crack against the wood and rolls toward the living room archway off the front foyer. Sylvia is unsure if the noise is from the ashtray or the table, which Richard overturns—the coasters, magazines, a book, and the wine corks, which he only recently set down ever so carefully on one corner, scatter at high velocity across the room. Now by the window, he yanks once, twice, three times before ripping down all the curtains. Books are pulled from the shelves and fly behind him, landing on top of each other, bending pages and covers; a few volumes, some heavy, land on top of Sylvia. There are so many of them. This goes on and on.

And when Richard is done, finally, he stands facing the hollowed wooden recesses of the shelves, panting, a dark line drawn down the center of his back from sweat. The air smells of old paper and perspiration.

Slowly he turns to look at Sylvia.

“Richard.”

She means to make it sound like a warning, but even to her ears it sounds like a whimper for mercy.

His face is blank. He is not angry, ashamed, or uncertain. It’s the same blank, denuding expression she’s seen a thousand times when men have looked

at her in lust. The blood around his mouth makes him look like a wild animal. She tries to scream, but finds her throat clamped shut with Richard's fingers. His other hand is fumbling frantically below the sofa. There's a loud snap. And the whole tension cord contraction springs back onto itself and Sylvia is free. And breathless and trapped. Her hands tingle from the sudden rush of blood into her extremities and her arms fall stupidly, uselessly to her sides. Richard's hand moves roughly up her top. Her arms can't move to fight him off. Losing patience, he's about to tear open her blouse when he freezes. He clamps his hand over her mouth to stop the guttural protest and terror issuing from it, which Sylvia does not recognize as coming from her until his hand stops it from escaping. And then everything is silent.

She doesn't recognize the sound immediately. A tinkling far away—an ice cream truck, a child's bike ringer, a set of keys. Her eyes dart wildly in her head with recognition.

"The flight was cancelled! Can you believe it? Snow! In London!"

It's Babs. A thud from luggage being dropped on the foyer. She walks past the living room archway and up the stairs. From the second floor Sylvia hears her continue to talk.

"And I forgot my pills! I was in the cab back home and looking in my purse for it. I found all these"—her voice is faint and Sylvia pictures Babs in a bathroom, looking inside the medicine cabinet—"Lactaid pills, but not my prescription. Just as well, I suppose, about the flight"—voice suddenly louder as if she's calling down the stairs from the top landing, then moving away once again; the pills weren't in the medicine cabinet—"The one thing I need to make sure my

arthritis doesn't act up from the altitude! I would have *had* to come back..."—a moment of silence and then a muffled—"Ah ha! Found it!"

Richard flings himself into the kitchen. Sylvia begins to regain some of the feeling in her arms and hands. She hears running water. Sounds of footsteps coming down the stairs.

"I can't believe this weather!"

She could have called out to Babs. She could have done that a hundred moments ago. But something stopped Sylvia. All she could think about as she tracked Babs' movement upstairs was how she could still feel Richard's hand prints on her chest, how at the moment when she knew he was about to rip off her buttons, she'd felt her heart flailing against her ribs almost as if it wanted to escape and have Richard squeeze it. The blood on his lips had made her want to clamp hers over the wound, which she had only moments before inflicted, and suck it to health. Terror of his hunger to take what he wanted without reflecting on his own ego or the consequences of his actions turned out not to incite terror at all, but an uncontrolled excitement, so primitive and uninhibited that it scared Sylvia to paralysis.

She had wanted what was coming.

She'd wanted to be taken by a man who believed he loved her so much that he would risk everything to have her, even risk her hatred.

And Sylvia realizes that she had never been loved till then. No longer was it Richard's fervid grip on her throat that took her breath away.

The sound of water in the kitchen stops. Babs appears beneath the transom of the living room door and gapes at the destruction wrought in her living room. Still in her coat and muffler with snowflakes in



her hair on the brink of melting, Babs manages to slowly turn her head to look at Sylvia.

“Sylvia?”

Sylvia coughs when she tries to say hello, but manages to say, “Babs.”

“What are you—”

Richard enters the living room with a kitchen towel in his hand.

“Richard?”

“Did you find your pills?” he says, wiping his hands and then taking off his glasses to wipe the lenses. He moves slowly, too methodically. Sylvia sees that he’s washed his mouth, but his lip is beginning to swell. Sylvia blushes with satisfaction.

“Yes, yes I did. But—”

Richard cocks his head to one side.

“Richard?” Babs says again, voice high and thin. She takes a step towards him and she hits her foot against the hard quartz protrusions of the ashtray. She lets out a laugh that sounds like a shriek. The vein on her temple moves so vigorously, Sylvia can see it throb from where she sits.

Following Babs’ gaze, Sylvia is momentarily mesmerized by the reflection of the room in the naked bay window: her sitting on the dark purple velvet sofa with Richard off to the left and Babs to the right; the belly of the coffee table partially obscured by the books thrown from their shelves; great mounds of books all over the carpeted space between her and the bookshelves; a bright speck of light close to Babs’ foot distracts her—it’s the overturned ashtray; the grandfather clock, which in the reflection looks as if the arms point to six and one. Five to six.

And then, against her will, she looks at Richard, who is standing before the gutted mahogany shelves.

In the reflection Richard seems to be standing amid a great dark space, a black hole. It transfixes her, this abyss. She forces her gaze back to her reflection and sees her mouth open and close and open again.

A thought occurs to her: people could see her from the outside while she cannot see anyone. Her hands begin to shake and her face burns.

“Sylvia,” says Richard before Sylvia can answer, “came by to... she came by to...”

They look at one another, Richard and Sylvia.

And Sylvia makes a choice that she doesn’t understand. All she knows is that this must not proceed any further. It’s not fear of Richard, but of her own response to him only moments before that she must suppress. A loving Sylvia is a possibility she has managed to keep buried. The urgency to remain as she has been overwhelms all other considerations. She must not scream or, worse, cry. She must get out of there; she must, she tells herself, keep her self to herself.

She reaches down into her bag, clenching and unclenching her hand to get it to work, and pulls out the box of chocolates she purchased for the night with Sean. Turning her gaze towards Babs, willing herself to look directly at her with a composed expression, she says, “Chocolates. I found out you were leaving and came to drop it off, but”—she shrugs for levity—“I was late. But here you are.” Sylvia tells herself to get up. Get up! “Here you are,” she says walking, one foot in front of the other, extending the box of candy towards Babs, who takes it from Sylvia and blinks several times quickly, unable to recognize the enlarged photo on the box of the candy to show the detailed image of the pieces within.

“Well, I better run.” Sylvia returns to the sofa and can feel Richard’s gaze on her as she picks up her

purse from the floor and grabs her coat. "I'm meeting someone," she says raising her eyes to meet his gaze with a look of determination that is almost tender. "I'm already very late."

Before Babs can say another word, Sylvia is out the door.

The world is white and silent and strange. She needs a moment to orient herself. She must get home. Just get yourself home. She puts on her coat; her gloves are not in the pockets, but nothing could tempt her to knock on the door to see if she misplaced them inside.

As she walks past the house, she looks up and sees through the snow and the curtain-less window Richard staring at her, and Babs, working her arthritic hands and frantically gesturing at the room. She cannot move beneath his gaze. Then she realizes that he cannot see her at all and, in fact, is staring at his own reflection, the destruction wrought on his living room, the figure of his sister gesticulating wildly, perhaps even contemplating the black emptiness behind him.

Only once she begins to walk away does Sylvia realize that she has been holding her breath.

\* \* \*

At home, she strips and showers. Reaching for the bar of soap, she sees the twin bands of red across her wrists. She holds up both of them and touches the nascent bruises in turn where less than an hour ago she had been held captive. Bound, loved madly. Madly most of all. Sinking down, sitting beneath the ablution, she brings her arms to her chest and hugs her wrists, kisses them tenderly and holds them to her chest once more, rocking back and forth.

# Stranger

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by David. S. Atkinson

I was waiting in my room. I sat on my bed and stared down at my lime green shag carpet. My little blue plastic TV, the one with a handle like a lunch-box, was on my desk. I thought about turning it on, but it only got local channels and there wouldn't be anything on but news. Besides, I was supposed to wait for my dad to come in.

My bedroom door swung open, hiding the Mr. T poster with all the spit wads on it, and my dad walked in. He slowly shut my door. At first I thought he was going to sit next to me, but then he seemed to think and pulled out the metal folding chair at my desk and sat there instead. I didn't know why my dad wanted to talk to me right after school. The school year had just started. I couldn't be in trouble this soon.

"Peter," he said. Then he stopped. He looked tired. "Peter," he said again, "what have you heard about Arthur Gowen?"

I blinked and tried to think. I couldn't remember who that was.

"The boy that lives behind Steven's," he went on when I didn't say anything. "The house that has dark brown stucco falling off. Next door to your little friend Joy."

"Oh." That was the one where that ugly old black car that looked like it was part truck parked. "He's the

kid that got expelled.”

My dad ran his fingers through his mustache, cupping his hand over his chin. He'd been shaving his beard for a while, but he still let his hair and mustache go all shaggy. “That's him.” He paused. “But that's not what I meant. Have you heard anything recently?” He was talking all weird. All proper, like he'd rehearsed.

I shook my head and my bed creaked. The bed was really old. Not the mattress, but the bed. It was dark and metal, painted with some sort of black metal paint, and the headboard had these faded dark wispy flowers on it. It'd been mine longer than I could remember. I didn't even know where it came from.

My dad looked down at his leather slippers and hunched his shoulders. “Arthur has been arrested.”

I tried to remember what Arthur looked like. I could only remember seeing him that time playing in Steven's backyard way back. He kept doing this weird thing where he'd come out looking for his crazy brother. Said he'd escaped from that attic they kept him locked up in. Then he ran inside and changed his clothes and came outside with a cut up t-shirt wrapped around his head, pretending to be the crazy brother. Me and Steven didn't fall for it and we told him.

My dad cleared his throat and tugged at the neck of his shirt. It was his black Huskers one. “Arthur has been sneaking his father's car and driving around.”

“Where?” I asked.

“He tried to get other boys, younger ones, to go with him,” my dad went on, like I hadn't said anything. “Apparently a couple did. Arthur parked behind someone's garage and made them do things. Sexual things.”

I swallowed.

My dad looked up at me. Then he looked away, over at my brown curtains with the tan jungle scenes and no animals.

My stomach hurt. I thought about training.

“One of the boys had to go to the hospital. The police were called. Arthur won’t be able to hurt anyone anymore. He’s going to jail for a long time. That’s what you have to do to molesters. Lock them away.”

My mouth tasted throw up. Steven and me just trained for when we got girls. Nicky too. We didn’t do that sick stuff. I wasn’t one of those molesters. They were worse than anything, worse than people who killed people. Training was Steven’s idea anyway. I couldn’t go to jail for that. But Nicky, what if he told somebody? What if he said it was my idea? They might put me in jail and tell everyone I was one of those.

My dad put his hands together, almost like he was praying. “Peter,” he said again. His voice cracked a little when he said it.

I waited and tried to swallow again, but it felt like I couldn’t. Maybe he knew already. Maybe Nicky’d told.

“Did—” He stopped again. “Did Arthur ever try to get you to do anything? Anything that made you feel uncomfortable?” His head was down, but his eyes were looking up at me. He looked terrified.

“No!”

“You have to be able to tell me, Peter,” my dad pleaded. “You have to know you can talk to me. If something happened like that, it isn’t your fault.”

“He never did anything!”

My dad took a deep breath and exhaled loud. “Good.”

I tried not to look at him, but he was looking at me. I just wanted him to stop. I already told him nothing happened. It made me keep thinking of training. My head wouldn't stop twitching, like I couldn't get my neck to sit right.

"You know what to do if anybody ever tries anything like that, right?"

"Yes," I said too quickly.

"Run and tell an adult," he said. "Tell me. Don't do anything that makes you feel funny. That's how you know. If it makes you feel funny, then it's bad. Right?"

"Right."

He sighed again and stood. Then he walked over and hugged me. Hard, hard enough to hurt a little. Like he was trying to keep me from running off. I went limp, waiting for him to let me loose.

"All right, then," he said when he finally let me go. He stood up real straight and backed up a step, hooked his thumbs in his pockets and took another deep breath.

I was still sitting on the bed. I hadn't moved.

"Your mom should have dinner ready soon," he said, looking over at my bedroom door. "She's making roast."

I nodded. He nodded too. Then he turned and walked out of my room, but he didn't shut the door. I ran over once he was gone and shut it. Then I sat back down on my bed.

# In Hope We Find This Nation

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by Christopher Linforth

Pym Dark came into my office and sat opposite the potted bamboo and Seurat print. His notebook, he said, contained ideas, proposals, contingencies for a new aesthetic—although, when I saw it, they were crossed out, leaving sequences of black oblongs and irregular circles reminiscent of Morse code. What his book had once held, he said, was connected to the persistence of vision, a long-debunked theory that argued perceived motion originated from the afterimage. To muddy the situation, I'd been a proponent of the theory, albeit a modified version that incorporated Freud's ideas about repression.

In our meeting, Pym recited a line from his mother: "Art is a figment of the intellect." He hadn't thought much of these words when they were originally spoken. Even months after experiencing this idea in bodily form—a woman—he was still wary of what it meant. Sometimes, he said, he could smell the woman's faint scent: a mix of liniment oil and body salt. This recurring sensation could be described either as a manifestation of a hope that he would see her again or as a symptom of his condition.

After another unsuccessful semester at Harvard he'd taken the train to New York to stay with a high school friend, Philip Lomez, a grad student at Columbia. Pym thought Manhattan would be the ideal



place to develop his theory of aesthetics during the summer break. Years before, he'd visited with his mother, taking in the sights and staying in a hotel near Times Square. They'd seen the Statue of Liberty and a man vomit on one of the pedestal walls. The man tried to scrape the vomit off with a branch, but instead he left odd markings that resembled a cave painting: a bison or perhaps an auroch.

In Philip's one-bedroom walkup in Morningside Heights, Pym slept on the couch. For the first week he rarely left the building. Instead he sat in Philip's vinyl recliner, smoked Philip's cigarettes, and drank Philip's coffee while leafing through immunology textbooks from the living room shelf. Between them was a book he'd never read, a paperback edition of *Le Temps Retrouvé*. As he held the novel and tried to decipher the cover—an Impressionist watercolor of an alleyway—he challenged himself to get through the four hundred or so pages in one or two sittings. Occasionally, when he took a break from reading, he would look out onto the street, where he could see a busy deli and a hair salon at the bottom of a large gray tenement.

By the second week, Philip had set for Pym a new schedule: every day at nine he left the apartment to catch the D train to Bryant Park from which he walked one block to the Public Library. That building, Philip said, would be a distraction-free and scholarly location where Pym could write down his theories. Pym was glad for the change, as he'd not got past the opening section of Proust's novel—the dense and alien French prevented him from making any serious progress.

Most days he was first in line at the main entrance. Sometimes an elderly man with a short, graying beard

and a white shirt lashed with faded black suspenders stood near the steps, studying the patterns of dried gum that littered the pavement. Pym sat on the low wall facing the library and pretended to read the *Daily News*. The man ran his finger over the bumps and petrified tooth marks. When security opened the doors, the man wouldn't move; he didn't seem interested in what was inside. He was only focused on drawing imaginary lines from one piece of gum to another.

One morning Pym spoke to him. He sat beside him on the steps and pointed to a headline in his newspaper.

"Odd that," he said.

"What?"

"This phrase: 'Double Bind Receives Grant.'"

"I don't trust words," the man said, standing up. He paced around in a circle, making sure to avoid the gum. "Give me your coffee."

Pym felt sorry for him. The man's shirt cuffs had thick dirt rings and his pants had large ketchup stains near the crotch. Pym found three-dollars in his wallet and offered them. "This should be enough."

"No, your cup." The man took it from Pym, removed the lid, and poured the coffee on the ground in a strange zigzag motion. Geometric shapes, crumpled trapezoids and wonky parallelograms were set off from one another like a child's version of the Nazca Lines.

They both stared at the patterns, which evaporated a few minutes later. Pym gestured that he was going inside, but the man ignored him, his focus still on the ground.

On the third floor, through hallways and marble flooring that smelled of Clorox, was Room 315. People knew it as the Rose Reading Room, a century-old

public area to sit and study. As Pym entered he liked to look at the ceiling with its three murals of swirling pink clouds and light blue skies. Below, a line of offices and help desks divided the room. Each side was a fractured mirror image with slight, almost imperceptible differences. Both had rows of oak tables with bronze reading lamps and leather-bound reference books stationed at the ends.

He sat at the tenth desk, on the right-hand side. He preferred it because the sunlight stayed there longest, from morning to late evening. The corner position suited his wish that everything should be in front of him. He laid out his notebook and pencils, making sure to cover the 369 on the desk as the multiples made him uneasy. During the day tourists appeared; they took pictures, then exited sharply, leaving the room in silence. Their appearance and abrupt disappearance usually went unnoted; only when they spoke loudly and their voices echoed did they receive a cold stare or a roll of the eyes from an annoyed patron. One time he heard a woman complain that, "Non-members are moving the books." He could only see her jacket, the rest of her obscured by a tour group. Her voice, though, seemed familiar, like he'd heard it before, perhaps in the coffee shop near the library, or back at Harvard, or even from his childhood. As the group left he noticed the woman was no longer there and that the room was being emptied by a burly attendant who twirled his finger in the air and said, "Ten minutes. We close in ten minutes."

Like always, Pym wrote until the last second. His ideas were not constructed in the normal sense; instead he relied upon a series of repeated descriptions, one replacing another with only minute changes. These passages of text were only approximations of

intent, word-images that signified the crux of his theory: enlightenment through repetition. Later, he didn't relate his strange ideas to Philip, relying, as he did, on his generosity and the contents of his icebox. Pym was unsure of what Philip sought in return, apart from a signed copy of the treatise. It was possible Philip thought more fondly of their years together in high school or perhaps he empathized over the health of Pym's mother.

As the days passed at the library, Pym saw, on each occasion, the same people. None of them knew each other by name, but they created a community separate from the tourists with its own space and code of nods and shrugs. Every morning a middle-aged Korean woman, dressed in a business suit and with dyed hair tied up by a red band, would sit two desks away. She had a black notebook in which she worked on an art monograph for an exhibition at the Met. On the table she would lay out 10x12 photographs of naked men and women stretched, hung, crushed, and ripped apart—the bodies bruised and tattooed with khafs, dalets, and gimels. He recognized these Hebrew letters from a linguistics class taken sophomore year, but the purpose of the letters' placement eluded him.

The second member of Pym's triad was a well-dressed man in pin-stripe pants and a tightly pressed blue shirt, who took a seat close to the dictionary on the lectern. He would arrive at noon with a thick sheaf of paper and a mechanical pencil. On the quarter hour, he took the list of words he'd been jotting down for the previous few minutes and looked them up, scrupulously writing down their meanings. Once, as Pym passed the man's desk, he found a list left behind: *diactinism*, *diad*, *diadelphous*.

He wasn't sure of the significance or what exactly the project entailed. The first word had something to do with physics and the sending of radioactive waves; the second, usually spelled with a Y, concerned the unification of a man and a woman; and the third referred to plants, in particular the joining of stamens. Three branches of investigation: physics, sociology, biology. The words seemed to encompass a compendium of knowledge and lexicography. Each came from Greek and related Latin roots pertaining to the idea of two-ness. The purpose, though, remained obscure. It occurred to him that, perhaps, the man was a college professor or an academic crank completing his magnum opus.

Unlike his classes, the man's investigations inspired Pym to learn more about the nature of intellectual inquiry. In turn, Pym's behavior reminded me of one of Freud's early cases and I double-checked Frampton's *Methodologica* to aid my analysis. After I compared notes, I watered the bamboo and pulled out some dead shoots. "The plant's dying," he said. I'm not sure these were his exact words as soon after, when he noticed the Dictaphone underneath my paperwork, he convinced me to delete the tape before he would continue his account.

In the library, he searched the shelves in hope of finding a suitable text. Sorting through hundreds of books on literature, history, and visual art, he found a four volume set half-hidden by a wooden cart stacked with dusty encyclopedias. The books were first editions, vellum-bound with a gilt spine. Each had a similar illustration on the front: an amphora patterned with a geometric shape—circle, triangle, square, pentagon—and the title *In Hope We Find This Nation*. Written by an Englishman, Edward

Lawrence, the books detailed his personal account of New York after the First World War. Volume one contained a scant biographical note: his birth year (1894) and the fact after his wife died from influenza he'd traveled to America on the *USS Plattsburg* with the returning soldiers. In New York, wary of the recent subway accidents he'd read about in the newspapers, he explored the city by foot, writing in his notebook a lengthy description of the Model T Ford, the prices of bread and whiskey, unusual restaurant names, details from a Ringling Brothers billboard, and observations about parts of the city inhabited by the Irish, the Jews, the Chinese, and the Italians. When he could, he collected items in his buckskin satchel, often completely filling it with bus tickets, medicinal salves, political pamphlets, slick magazines, and stereographs of the Flatiron Building and the Statue of Liberty. During the late evenings, he sat in a Bowery flop-house and wrote up his findings.

Within an hour, Pym had read the first chapter. The prose had an ornate style that let sentences go for pages, clause upon clause building an interior structure that mimicked an adding machine's computations. The material drove him on so fast he didn't notice the tears until they hit the page. He told me the pain started as a small irritation in his left eye, a feeling that something was scratching at his sclera, slowly peeling it off in thin strips. Saline eye drops from a nearby drugstore temporarily soothed the discomfort and allowed him to continue reading. My initial note had this down as incidental, but as he explained the later events of that day I changed my opinion to something more unsettling.

In the library, he'd found the lights flickering in an odd sequence of short and long pulses. The pulses

were a mix of bright white and soft yellow that somehow altered his vision, leaving a gray film over his sight. No one close to him seemed to be affected, or even have noticed the phenomenon. Somewhat alarmed, he coughed loudly in the direction of the Korean woman.

She turned around.

“What’s happened to the lights?”

She glanced at the chandeliers and then down to the bronze lamp on his table. “They look fine.”

“Are you sure?”

She collected her photographs, placing them into her notebook, and moved to a table on the other side of the room.

In his peripheral vision he could see shadows with no substance, lucid shapes compressed into a dark wafer figure. A stick-thin woman in a cream halter dress emerged. She had a shaven head and stood near the center of the room, but close to the exit, and her gaze was fixed on him. He considered that maybe she was the same woman he’d heard complain days before, that maybe she liked to sit on the other side, where she pursued a similar project to him. He closed his eyes and counted to three. On reopening them, she had been replaced by the attendant who studied Pym with interest and the Korean woman, who whispered in the attendant’s ear and pointed Pym’s way.

\* \* \*

The hair salon outside Philip’s apartment had a strange name. The rusting sign, and the photographs of women in the window, reminded Pym of a typical Lawrence experiment in which he would collect business names and list them to resemble a Sur-

realist poem. He repeated the name over and over. Something about “A Cut in Time” wouldn’t leave him alone. It seemed to contain remnants of Proust, unstable memories of the past. Perhaps as a diversion he told me the hair salon was populated with a clientele different from the deli next door. The deli attracted a working crowd from the nearby insurance office and the strip of franchise stores half a block away. The salon entertained middle-aged women with graying hair hidden under hats and scarves. They left with colorful bobs, blond highlights on straightened hair, or perms that bounced as they walked.

After hours of staring, the view became a postcard: a solidified image of what he thought was outside. His attention to the scene, to the piqued detail of ordinary life, was a hangover from his indulgence in the printed word. For the old magazines and newspapers Philip owned soon ran out. Even after Pym attempted to translate *Le Temps Retrouvé* with his poor French he still had too much time to think about the woman at the library and the work of Edward Lawrence. Even when Philip, or his girlfriend, Annie, would talk to Pym, he only half-listened.

“You know I like having you around,” Philip said. “But it’s not good for either of us to have you sit here all day.”

“There’s an interesting view.”

Philip went to the window, looked outside, and then turned to Pym. “So come on, what happened?”

“Writer’s block.”

Philip smiled. “It’s been a week. I’ve got exams coming up and Annie’s complaining about the mess.”

Pym stood and positioned himself between Philip and the collection of wine bottles, yellowing newspapers,



and coffee cups with cigarette butts sunken at the bottom. "I don't see what the problem is."

"You were always like this, even in honors English."

"Like what?"

"Blind to what's going on."

"That's unfair."

Philip picked up a cup and peered inside. "I'm just trying to help."

Pym stepped past him to the window and craned his neck to see the tall buildings of midtown. "I'll go back tomorrow."

\* \* \*

The next day he didn't see the woman. Maybe he'd imagined her, or perhaps she'd been just another tourist, another chance meeting given too much significance. For years he'd believed in coincidence. As a child he wrote his own horoscopes, changing his sign to fit with what happened the day before, showing the typed up and dated columns to his friends as proof. Often they told their parents and he was invited to dinner to talk about his strange gift. He never accepted the offers, though, choosing instead to spend his nights pasting the horoscopes into his scrapbook and thinking about what he should do the next day.

These memories were soon lost to the business of the reading room and the familiar faces of the Korean lady and the man with his lists of words. Pym claimed his usual seat and placed his bookbag and coffee down and retrieved volume one of Lawrence's book. The text seemed recently thumbed and slightly dirtier than he remembered, with newspaper ink marks and rings of what appeared to be tea on the pages.

The second chapter concerned an analysis of the area Crow Hill in Brooklyn and its change to Crown Heights in 1916. Lawrence detailed the names of the Jewish families to chart any future diaspora to another neighborhood. As a self-taught historian and linguist, he wanted to compare the situation to his own observations in England. The ensuing chapters revisited this data in unusual ways; a red ink graph displayed surname length on the x-axis and years in the neighborhood on the y. A common name like Miller corresponded to 16 years, whereas Auerbach had 22.5 years. In his conclusions, further on, he found a disturbing correlation. Tables of data supported one hypothesis: residents were being forcibly removed. On a topographical map, an elliptical curve had the St. Ignatius Church as point *O*. The nearby tenement buildings and brownstones were repossessed, or leases terminated, the land bought up by a fronted property company, Allmen Inc., located in Weehawken, New Jersey.

He read all day to finish the book, eating only some granola from his bag and drinking water from the fountain. He considered Lawrence's views but was unsure whether to believe them. Lawrence seemed to be looking for patterns, a way to understand the world in front of him. Pym remained unconvinced; however, he knew he wanted to know more. Each subsequent book was longer—probably denser—and he was eager to get through them. At the shelf, volume two was missing. He examined the surrounding books to see if it had been misplaced. He walked parallel to the shelf, running his index finger over dozens of spines until he saw, on the other side of a cart, the woman from before. She was sitting on a small wooden stool. The late afternoon light revealed

a few grays in her hair, which seemed shorter than the previous time, like she'd had a buzz cut in the last few days. She was wearing a beige cotton cardigan over a white vest and blue jeans with black pumps.

He rounded the cart and stood next to her, thinking about what he should say. She was not conventionally beautiful like the girls he'd dated in the past, trust fund types who were only interested in living the same lives as their parents.

She glanced up. "Are you okay?"

"That book you're reading," he said pointing at it. "I'm reading the entire set—"

"And you thought that gave you priority."

"Something like that."

She stood, closed the book, and pushed the stool with her foot to the side. "When I've finished, I'll be sure to let you know."

He grabbed her arm, and then just as quickly let it go. "No, I need it. My time is limited."

She gestured for Pym to follow, and they walked over to his table. "I believe this is where you were sitting." She placed the book down. "We need a contract. Not a legal one, more an understanding that we should discern our reason for reading these books."

He nodded but was unsure of what she meant.

She pointed to the chairs, and they both sat down, allowing the contract to begin. Through June they read together. She came every day, her clothes barely changing, just slight color variations on the same vest and jeans. On Fridays, though, she wore plain dresses and wedge sandals and she carried with her a cup of herbal tea that smelled of peppermint and lemon and she would slowly sip it, making it last the entire day. Only rarely would they talk. Occasionally there would be a stuttered conversation in which he attempted to

ask her out or tried to make a date with her somewhere else. She would lean in, and he could smell a hint of perfume that had perhaps been put on days before. "This is our place," she would reply to his suggestions.

After these obtuse statements she would leave and come back days or sometimes weeks later. He wondered if she was ever married, and he often looked for a band of white skin or an indentation from a recently removed wedding ring. In their brief talks she never mentioned anybody else, or that she had to go and meet somebody. He often toyed with romantic notions of who she was and why she read with him. He thought, perhaps, she didn't live in the city but commuted in when she was able.

One late afternoon, when the library was full of people trying to escape the humidity, he decided to follow her as she left. He gave her a couple of minutes, then grabbed his bookbag and headed for the main exit. As he ran down the stairs, he saw her from the window, her thin body visible as a strong breeze tightened the back of her sundress. His face pressed to the glass, he thought of calling out to her, but he didn't know her name. He knew nothing about her. He could only watch as she disappeared into the crowds heading toward Grand Central.

\* \* \*

A few weeks later, he was in a midtown coffee shop with Philip. They had stopped there briefly at Pym's suggestion. He could tell by Philip's foot tapping that he was annoyed that he'd brought him away from his studies without giving any explanation. As they waited in line, Pym recalled his mother telling

him how caffeine eased her headaches. “They’re caused by my medulloblastoma,” she said. “It’s a type of brain tumor.” The magnitude of what she was saying took a minute or so to sink into Pym’s mind. Before he could reply, she smiled and asked, “How’s school?”

“Take this,” said Philip, passing Pym a cup of coffee. He gestured his thanks and they walked to the nearby rear entrance of the library. Following Pym’s lead, Philip passed his bag to security. As the guard rummaged through the textbooks and back issues of *Nature*, Philip turned to Pym: “What are we doing here?”

“I need you to see her.”

“I knew this was about a girl.”

Pym didn’t speak, but directed him to the stairs.

Philip slung his bag over his shoulder. “Are you stalking her?”

“I haven’t seen her for a while.”

In Room 315, he guided Philip to his desk. They sat for a few moments watching the archway. He pointed out the man with his wordlists; he had two bound folios of completed work and a thick sheaf ready to be inscribed. Far to his right, the Korean lady was hunched over her desk. She appeared to be editing the galleys of her monograph, noting typos and errant commas. It was difficult to see her work, but it must have been nearing completion.

Philip appeared bored by Pym’s odd bits of commentary. To mask the time Pym showed him Lawrence’s books, but he displayed no interest. “It’s got science stuff in here too,” Pym said, pointing to a histogram that compared heights of city buildings. “Singer Tower, the Metropolitan Life Tower, the Woolworth—”

Philip stood. "I've got to go."

"Stay one more hour."

He shook his head. "Try working on those theories of yours."

For the rest of the day Pym went through his notebook blotting out all of his sentences. In our short time together, I tried to decipher some of the words and I pointed to a few on the page. This led to questions, though he asked them of me: *Why do you insist that I fill out a child's connect-the-dots drawing? Why are you so obsessed by Edward Lawrence? Why did you offer me money to visit your office?*

I stood and pulled down the blinds, cutting out the view of the cold storage warehouse and the outline of Manhattan beyond. He complained about the darkness and his left eye hurting again. As an experiment, I told him the blinds were not shut. That, in fact, he just imagined they were. He became quiet for a while, his eyes closed, as though he was about to meditate. I retrieved my camera from the drawer and took his picture, and although later the negatives were destroyed in the darkroom, he remained unaware of my actions. After a few minutes, I told him I would open the blinds if he abandoned his questions and continued. He nodded.

His past attempt in trailing her led, although he was not sure how, to a prolonged absence on her part, and as the summer wore on he read by himself. In volume three, he found a lengthy description of the changing color of the Hudson River. Lawrence observed the water shift from a grayish blue at dawn to a blackened orange at sunset. Over a two-month period he became enamored with the river and spent much of his time watching the fishing boats come in and out of the harbor. In late September of 1920, he

acquired passage on an aging sailing trawler that had been hired to transport scientific instruments to Troy. On the hurried journey upriver he often wondered about the crate locked in the hold. It didn't seem worthwhile to take such a small cargo. His queries to the captain went unanswered, and this fueled his paranoia about what they were really carrying. For days he speculated in his notebook: a cache of forged Liberty bonds. Photographs of women in unnatural states. A dismembered body.

As the trawler passed Cortlandt he found the hold open. For a couple of minutes he examined the crate, noting the same Allmen Inc. stamp he'd seen on the mortgage documents in Crown Heights. Before he could look inside the cook discovered him, and he was confined to his cabin. Inside he only had a bed, a wooden slop bucket, and his trunk, which contained his second set of clothes (short suit jacket and cuffed trousers, waistcoat, and black leather belt) and some matches, which he lit to make crude charcoal. He used his time to sketch the landscape he could see through the porthole. Slowly, as they neared Troy, his drawings of the low hills and the maple and cedar forests became otherworldly, branches elongated across the whole sky. After his release, he put this down to some sort of poisoning. He returned to New York by train convinced his sickness had originated from the river, his drinking water tampered with by the crew.

Pym studied the facsimile reproductions of the drawings. Several pages were a smudged mess, a conglomeration of black lines merging into one another as though white space needed to be eliminated. It reminded him of his failed attempt to describe a new aesthetic, a system of explicating the abstract and the

unreal. Since his mother's cancer had worsened he hadn't been able to see her face; his memories of her lost to another time. He stared at the drawings for a few minutes, and then he closed the book.

He began to attend a movie club situated at the north end of Central Park that put on old black and white films using a 16mm projector and a white tarpaulin pinned to the side of Belvedere Castle. Run in secret by organizers in balaclavas and thick woolen jackets, each film lasted only fifteen minutes. They played avant-garde montages. Some days it consisted of porcine copulation and ironclad warships going into dry dock. Others had Chinese women pointing to their foot binding and the open sea, cloudless to the horizon. Each film ended in a serene moment: calm water, clear sky, a painted wall. Like a Rorschach test, each film provoked different interpretations, new ways for the audience to understand what was going on. He felt there was a system at work, something dynamic and overarching. The image of the boar mounting the sow seemed to exist for shock value; the close up of the penis intercut with the warship closing in on the dock was almost a pastiche of the old conditioning films he'd seen in his psychology classes.

Several times he considered not going back but instead reinstating his trips to the library. Yet something about the club, the hurried manner of the organizers, who stripped the equipment down in a couple of minutes and strolled quickly out of the park, kept him interested. One night he watched them at a distance from behind a ginkgo tree, a pocket telescope aiding his view. They erected the impromptu cinema in less than half an hour, using ropes and a pulley to hoist the tarpaulin, and a crate on a park



bench to support the projector. The film started with a lion dying from an epileptic fit, the body shaking for a few minutes on the floor of a circus cage. A crude splice transitioned to a grass field. At the edge of the screen, he could see the girl from the library naked. She had on a wig; it looked coarse, like theatrical hair. He wasn't sure what to make of it, or even able to assess whether it was her in the film.

He knew he had to act. He ran for fifty yards. Then he crept up on the man packing the projector away in a leather gym bag. He took off the man's balaclava. The man's face was sweaty, his beard unkempt, and he looked around the park as though people would identify him and call the police.

"Who is she?"

The man started to walk away. "I don't know."

"How did you get her picture?"

"These are the things we do," he said.

\* \* \*

The day before Pym was to head back to Harvard he found her at his desk, reading the last book. He approached, attempting to be casual, with one hand in the back pocket of his jeans and the other loosely holding his sunglasses. As they made eye contact she didn't speak, but pointed to where she was on the page.

He put his hand on her shoulder. "I want to see you outside."

"We can only be together here in this room."

"But why?" he said, taking his hand away. "I don't understand."

She watched as he awkwardly crossed his arms, leaving his sunglasses to jab his ribs.

“I saw you in a film,” he said.

“That’s unlikely.”

“You were naked.”

“Let’s read.”

Volume four concerned Lawrence’s self-imposed containment and his continued sickness, which now consisted of muscle cramps in his legs and arms and severe headaches throughout the day. He kept within ten blocks of the flophouse, fearing the rivers on either side of the island. One morning, while he strolled through the neighborhood, a tourist took his picture outside of an Italian café that served cannoli and strong coffee for a nickel. As the man walked away Lawrence wondered why he’d been in the picture: Had his illness been apparent? Or was the man just interested in the picturesque frontage of the café?

Over the next few months these questions troubled him more as he saw the growth of photography in the city, particularly the underground trend of solarisation. While in the darkroom, prints would be subjected to bright bursts of light, changing the tone, shadows, and lines of contrast. The images, according to Lawrence, were absurd. Models were rendered androgynous—flesh seemed to disappear into the ether. He remarked upon the exhibitions that circulated through Paris, London, and New York; they had names such as “Light—Visions,” “Dada: The Magic Binary,” and “City/Gray/Space.” At his lodgings he set up a darkroom using an enlarger, printing frame, and stoneware tanks, bought from a bankrupt camera club. At night, he walked the streets and took pictures of Lower East Side prostitutes. Often they posed for him, sometimes clothed, sometimes not. Rarely did they charge him. After developing the photographs he attempted his own solarisations, but the images

came out gray and muddy. For almost a year he worked on the process, slowly getting closer to an untainted print. He used different light sources: a flashlight, a candle, a flare, a carbide lamp. All failed. Only an editor's note indicated what happened next. Lawrence had abandoned the flophouse, owing several months of rent. His writings, sketches, photographs, clothes, were found by the landlady and sold, somehow ending up with a publisher based in New Jersey.

The woman, it appeared, had grown tired of the accumulation of facts, events, and observations. She turned the pages with a listless pace. Her eyes were sunken, and her skin had grown visibly pale. He wasn't sure, as they read in silence, if this was related to the film or his presence being anathema to her health. He knew as she came onto the last page he needed to break the impasse: "I leave tomorrow afternoon."

She pointed to the sentence she was on.

"I have my answer," he lied.

She smiled and closed the book. "I'm sad it's over."

"I thought maybe we could read something else. But I see now why that wouldn't work." He stood and collected his things.

\* \* \*

That afternoon was the only time I saw Pym. I gave him a check for an amount that would get me thrown out of the organization. He looked at it and told me to put it away. He suspected that I was the man in the park, perhaps also the gum man and the man with his wordlists. For hours he'd been talking,

projecting his fantasies onto me. But still I wanted to know more. I needed more information for the report: a way for me to get Lawrence's books. I offered him anything he wanted and he pointed to the Seurat. I agreed. Carefully, he lifted the print off the wall and leaned it against my desk. He sat back down and I gestured for him to finish his story.

At the Christmas break, Philip invited Pym to watch the apartment while he visited his family in Philadelphia. He hesitated at first, unsure if he wanted to relive the strange events of the summer. He went, though, taking the same train as before. Philip's place was close to how he remembered it, only cleaner and with a new chrome bookcase shaped like a wave and filled only with his textbooks. Philip had put enough food in the icebox to last for a few days: cold cuts—mostly pastrami and corned beef—a bag of Cortland apples, a fresh carton of skim milk, two loaves of wheat bread, and a can of tuna. The supplies came with a note, held down by a bacterium-shaped fridge magnet, which had instructions for living in the apartment and, underneath, a pamphlet detailing the library's opening hours over the holidays.

For a long time he looked out the window, taking in the view now dashed with a cold gray sludge, and drank vermouth mixed lightly with tonic. Through the warm haze of the alcohol he thought about his mother, who had died a month or so before. His last day with her had gone poorly; she barely remembered Pym's name. She did instruct him, though, after Pym told her of his summer experiences, to "Appreciate truth in all its forms." Pym left the hospital unsure what to do with her advice, but in New York he realized he had to know if *the woman* still

visited the library. After sleeping on these considerations, he awoke the next morning and took the subway to Times Square. He exited past the heavy crowds shopping for gifts, to East 42nd, toward the Chrysler Building. He sat in Bryant Park shivering in the cold wind and rain and stared at the library until the doors opened with a muffled clang. He headed up the marble steps, past Corinthian columns, and into the cool, quiet interior. He drifted through corridors and anterooms, switching floors by double staircases without fully realizing where he was going.

On the third floor, a stuffy heat from the vents and a swirling breeze from the windows had replaced the summer air. A large notice on the wall detailed an upcoming restoration: sections of the library would be closed one by one, refurbished, then reopened in the same sequential order. A small footnote at the bottom indicated the Rose Reading Room would be the first to undergo the process. The tables and chairs would be taken out and plastic sheeting laid down; the books also would be removed to another room so structural work could be completed.

The Korean lady and the wordlist man were gone, substituted by a new triad: the NYU student cramming for his finals, the panhandler by the heater, and the bored library clerk staring out from his booth. Pym looked for Lawrence's books, but after he found them missing he asked the clerk if he could locate them. *In Hope We Find This Nation*, the clerk said, had been put into storage due to its "low circulation rate" and wouldn't be available until after the restoration.

# School Bus

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by David Williamson

The Grungies ran a racket in the back of Chesterfield County School Bus 83. Everyone at school called them the Grungies because they wore combat boots and flannel shirts. I called them that because to me they smelled like zit cream and pus and puberty. There were three of them. Mark Sales and Jimmy Bancroft and Rick Mertzner.

The back three rows were reserved for those who paid. Five bucks got you a seat for a week and the privilege to pass around whatever nudie magazine Jimmy Bancroft had swiped from his older brother. Jimmy had a greasy face and long hair. He shaved the sides of his head so when he pulled it back in a ponytail he was bald up to his temples.

The downside to seeing the nudie magazine was having to sit close to the Grungies, which meant putting up with their smells, their sense of humor, their snot and spit, and the scabs they picked and flicked around the back of the bus. Every day they added to a collection of dried boogers smeared on the back window, like the hive of some mutant insect.

I became involved in all this because the back seats were in high demand and short supply. That week, there were two more kids who had paid for the peep show than there were empty seats. So the Grungies expanded their territory by adding the fourth

row from the back for overflow patrons. And since I always sat in the fourth seat from the back, driver's side, window, I was now in the precarious position of occupying commercial space.

"Five bucks," Rick Mertzler said through his small mouth, all his teeth crammed to the front. "Five bucks and you can keep your seat." He sounded as though he talked through a mouthful of marbles.

"I don't even want to look at your stupid magazines," I said.

Rick Mertzler leaned over me. His arms rested on the backs of either seat. His Alice In Chains t-shirt, cut off at the shoulders, did little to absorb his thick musk. A speck of lint clung to the hair curling from his left armpit. I turned to the window and breathed through my mouth.

"That's because you're a faggot," Rick said. "And I wouldn't let you look at the girls anyway because you'd gag and barf up faggot puke all over the place and we'd all get AIDS and die."

The girls, I thought. As if he ran something.

"Why should I pay?" I asked. I didn't mind moving to another seat. In fact, that would've made my ride to school more pleasant, less odorous. But I had managed to sit in the same seat all year without any harassment from the Grungies and I wasn't going to write any of them a pass to do so now. It was a matter of pride. In the seventh grade, sitting where I wanted was no small matter.

"Business is expanding." Mark Sales's head popped up behind me. He picked at a crop of pimples on his check. The zits on Mark's face always oozed and bled because he couldn't stop picking at them. Sometimes he'd lick his finger and use it to stanch the blood. There were always tiny red smears on the cuffs of his shirt or

the back of his hand. “You got to pay now.”

“This is my seat,” I said.

“Do you want to die?” Rick asked.

“No.”

“Then bring five bucks tomorrow.”

Mark shoved my head into the back of the seat in front of me. Bursts of anger, pain, and self-pity shot through my sinuses. I wanted to cry, but not because it hurt, though it did. In the moment my head hit the seat, I thought about my parents who loved me in their own weird way, about my dad who gave me five dollars a week and the Super Nintendo they’d bought me for my birthday. All those weird things that made me want to run home and hug my mom and tell her I loved her and somehow express I wasn’t ready to deal with cruelty and that I never wanted to experience the rest of the world.

Even if I thought to tell the bus driver, I wouldn’t have. Mr. Harris was retired—army, postal service, something—and more or less ignored us with our paper fights and our yelling and our clumsy use of profanity. If he knew about the Grungies’ little industry, he never let on. In the seventh grade, the intimidation of my peers had more power than any kind of administrative clout—bus driver or principal or otherwise. If I squealed on them on them to Mr. Harris, the Grungies would have probably tracked me down and done unspeakable things to me.

We all lived near each other, and I knew streets weren’t always safe. The year before, a kid from the high school shot another kid. I heard there were drugs involved, but I don’t really know for sure. It happened a few blocks from my house. I heard another thing about a girl who got raped in the woods where I used to hike and build forts. You didn’t have to live in the inner city to know that people got bored



and did horrible things.

When the bus stopped at my corner, I felt the relief of a Grungie-free afternoon. I counted the hours left before I had to see them again. Sixteen. I hated how a few minutes on the bus could stand so tall against my entire day.

The doors screeched closed and the bus rumbled off, a gray and vaporous tail spinning from the exhaust pipe. I could feel that cruel world drift farther and farther off, as a dream that loses its vividness when you wake up. I walked home. The houses and the familiarity of my street pushed out the fear and trembling I had felt in the presence of the burly half-developed bodies of my bus mates.

Isaiah Wentz was in my gravel driveway when I got home. A deflated soccer ball bounced off his knees. Isaiah was being home schooled. He woke up at 9:00 and got all his work done by lunchtime. He always waited for me, and in the remaining hours before I got home, he painted Civil War miniatures. I slipped the book bag off my shoulders.

“Do any drugs today?” he asked. The ball got away from him and he kicked out his leg, made contact and the ball soared to the left.

“Tons,” I said.

Isaiah always made cracks about public school as if the building itself was a warehouse of kids who engaged in controlled drug use and overt sexuality between classes where teachers taught atheism and watered-down history. I don’t know if he actually believed this or if he just parroted the misinformation his parents fed him in a kind of mediating irony. His parents always talked about the New Age movement. They were convinced that even the way the public schools taught math was New Age.

Isaiah's parents didn't let him do a lot of things. They didn't let him watch movies rated PG-13 or listen to anything but Christian rock music. They didn't let him go in my house when my parents weren't home and they didn't let him watch MTV, period.

The kids on our street used to all play together in elementary school. We would organize massive games of hide-and-go-seek with kids from neighboring streets. Because Isaiah's front porch was a huge wraparound, it was base, and our boundaries reached out to a half-mile radius.

But as each of us graduated to junior high, we played together less and less. Soon, everyone kept indoors except for Isaiah. I suppose the transformation for him was less pronounced. He moved from fifth grade to sixth grade without ever leaving his house. As the rest of us fumbled with locker combinations, changed classes, and grappled with the growing disparity of the two sexes, Isaiah continued to ride his bike and paint Civil War miniatures.

"You want to kick this around?" Isaiah kicked the ball high up and ran under it to catch it.

"No," I said.

"You want to ride bikes?"

"Nope."

"You want to get high?"

"As a kite." I sat down. "You ever see a *Playboy*?"

He stood on the ball. The air hissed through a hole. He stumbled off and the ball sat on the gravel, a rotten dinosaur egg with the top caved in.

"Yeah," he said. "Once."

"Really?" I asked.

"Yes."

"No you haven't."

"Seriously," he said. "During the fall youth re-

treat.”

Isaiah went on these trips with his church. They’d go to the beach in the springtime, and to a campground in the fall. I never went to church with him, but god, did he ask me to. I thought it would be cult-like and weird. My parents were hippies when they were young. That’s how I imagined Jesus. Just without the drugs.

“And you looked at it?”

“I saw it.” Isaiah said. “I mean, I didn’t read it or anything. I’m not a pervert.”

“Why not? Are you gay?”

“No. I’m just not a perv.”

“How does looking at a *Playboy* make you a perv?”

Isaiah bugged out his eyes and made a low droning noise in his throat.

“So someone brought a *Playboy* to your youth group?” I went over this as if I was understanding irony for the first time.

“Youth *retreat*. It’s like a really cool camp—”

“I know,” I said. “You’ve told me.”

The ball now was completely caved in on one side. Only a hemisphere left intact. Isaiah capped it onto his head.

“James Bancroft brought it. He goes to your school, right?”

“Jimmy Bancroft?” I jumped a little, as though Isaiah had dropped ice down my shirt. “He goes to church?”

“Yeah. James.”

A sudden thrill welled up. I thought of grungy Jimmy Bancroft sitting in a pew and wearing a sweater vest, his hair combed over and kept in place with its own grease.

“He got caught though,” Isaiah said, and then

made a face. “You know... touching himself.”

I rolled onto my back, clutched my belly and laughed. I was hysterical.

“It’s not funny,” Isaiah said. “It’s gross.”

I sat up and wiped my eyes. “Are you kidding? That’s the best thing I’ve ever heard in my life. What happened?”

“I don’t know. I only heard about it. I don’t want to gossip.” Isaiah balanced on the deflated soccer ball again, hands out to the side. I picked up a pile of gravel and lobbed one at Isaiah’s head. He lost his balance and fell off.

“Stop,” he said.

If only I had been there when it happened. I cursed myself for not going on the stupid retreat when Isaiah had asked. I wanted it on film, to watch over and over the moment Jimmy got caught looking at porn *at church*. I lobbed another rock at Isaiah.

“Cut it out.”

“I’ll keep throwing them until you tell me.” I threw another.

“I don’t know. All I know is he got caught. Someone told on him and Pastor Evans had a talk with him. He didn’t do anything else with us the whole weekend. Just sat there.”

“What was the talk?”

“I don’t know,” Isaiah said. “I’ve never done it.”

“You’ve never done it? Or you’ve never been caught?”

“That’s disgusting. You’re a pervert.”

“And you’re a douchebag.”

“What is that?”

“It’s you.” I threw another rock.

We spent the rest of the afternoon at Isaiah’s house playing video games. I kept asking him about

the incident with Jimmy Bancroft. Isaiah swore that he didn't know anything else, but I found out that no one talked to Jimmy at church. That he always sat on a chair and looked bored. Like he was better than everyone else, Isaiah said.

I didn't know what I was going to do about the Grungies the next day on the bus, but that night I counted my money. I had 20 dollars saved up for a new Super Nintendo game. If I paid the Grungies off, I'd never save enough. My dad was helping me out every week, and every week when he gave me five dollars he'd ask, "How much more you need now?" I'd tell him and he'd say that saving up was important. If I paid the five bucks, my dad would know. Then I'd get grilled about what I spent it on and I'd have to tell him that I had to pay off the school bullies to leave me alone.

I folded the dollar bills and slid them back into the envelope, dog-eared, creased, and frayed from overuse, and tucked it under my socks in the dresser and shut the drawer.

At first, the only thing I had at stake was social standing. But now there was something more at stake: not only my seat and my pride, but according to the Grungies, my life as well. At fourteen, masturbation ranked somewhere on the humiliation scale between having a visible boner and having everyone call you a faggot in the locker room. No one owned up to it, even though we were all doing it. At least that's what I assumed. I thought exposing Jimmy Bancroft's sexual blunder could get the rest of them off my back.

I imagined outing Jimmy Bancroft right in front of the other Grungies. I'd call him James. *James*. When he asked for his money I'd say, "Sorry, *James*, I don't

have it today.” And then I’d shout for the whole bus to hear, “*James*, how was youth group last night? Oh wait, I forgot, *no one likes you*. Not even at church because they caught you *whacking it* one holy night during a camping trip!” Then the attention would be off me, and Rick Mertzner and Mark Sales would cover their mouths and turn to Jimmy and point in his face and laugh their heads off, never mind if they thought it was true or not, and between doubled over belly laughs, the kinds that burn fat and give you cramps, they’d take a breath to call him a faggot. They’d turn to me and say, “You’re all right, kid,” or something corny like that, something only the Grungies could get away with saying. Maybe Jimmy wouldn’t be able to take it anymore and have to move to another bus because of the humiliation. The pain and suffering. Which would be fine for me. One less Grungie on the bus. Mark and Ricky would mostly leave me alone, but would also give me high fives in the hall at school now and then, and people would see this and ask, “Is Steven a Grungie?” and someone more astute would say, “Nah, he’s just cool with them.” Over the years, I had a lot of fantasies. None of them ever played out as I imagined.

The next day my confidence waned. The only money I had brought was the dollar fifty my mom gave me for lunch, and I intended to eat that day. I got on the bus, slid my hand in my pocket and muted the loose change that jingled there. I walked down the aisle and eyed the empty rows near the front. In the back, the Grungies slumped in their seats. Mark Sales snored with his head cocked back. Rick Mertzner wore headphones. Jimmy Bancroft just stared out the window. Maybe it had all blown over. I passed the empty spots and sat in my regular seat: fourth from the

back, driver's side, window.

After the bus got rolling it took all of twenty seconds for Rick Mertzner to slide into the seat opposite mine.

"Five bucks," he said.

"What?"

"That seat costs five dollars."

Jimmy and Mark made their way to the seat behind me. I was a one-man show.

"What are you even talking about?" I asked.

Mark flicked the back of my head with his knuckle.

"Cut it out," I said.

"Five dollars," Rick said.

"No."

"Are you retarded?"

"Are *you* retarded?" I asked.

Mark flicked me again. The surge of self-pity and anger and all that I felt when my face crashed into the seat in front of me the day before all came back. But I had leverage now. So when he did it again, I yelled. "Cut it out, dickhead."

"Hey."

I was surprised to hear Mr. Harris's sixty-something-year-old gargle issue from the front of the bus. I looked up and saw his eyes in that wide catchall rear-view mirror. No matter how old and decrepit, it seemed that all bus drivers had that weird omnipotence.

I turned my head back to the window.

"Steven," Rick said to me. "Stevie. Hey. Faggot. Do you hear me?"

We were almost out of the neighborhood, I figured if I could put up with it for five more minutes, we'd be in the bus loop of the school and I could get lost in the crowd. Putting up with that kind of abuse had to

be pared out in small portions.

But Rick kept talking. His voice, low and controlled. “Hey, faggot. You are dead. I will kill you.”

“Shut up,” I said.

“Five dollars. Now, Stevo.”

“Shut up.”

“Five dollars. Ten dollars. Steven. Hey, *fuck-up*.”

Five more minutes was too long. If I was going to do it, I was going to do it. I stopped thinking and blurted out, “James got caught whacking it at church youth group.”

Jimmy’s head popped up behind me.

“What did you say?” he asked.

I looked at him. “*James Bancroft*.”

Jimmy reached over and nudged my head. “What did you say?”

I tried to dodge his hand, but my head kept hitting the window.

“What did you say? Say it again.”

He pushed harder. My head cracked against the window. I leapt up and grabbed his oily face and squeezed. I lost my grip. It was all over then. Jimmy’s fists went to my head, knocking it hard against the window. He grabbed my collar and threw me out of the seat.

I flashed back to the day before, when I wasn’t face down against the bus’s grimy floor but upright, sure of myself and the place I had secured with the leverage of Jimmy’s folly, now my folly.

The bus braked hard and jolted forward, rolled me onto my back in the aisle. I could hear Mr. Harris yelling. Jimmy kicked me in the face. He stomped on my chest, my stomach. I tried to grab Jimmy’s shoe but he kept kicking. My balls felt like they had crawled up inside me. Something in my side cracked.



Mr. Harris, above me trying to reach for Jimmy. Rick Mertzner and Mark Sales pulled Jimmy back. My limbs flailed on their own accord. I was on the other side of some Rubicon. I had violated the smallest measurable space that, moments before, had kept me separate from the Grungies. I thought Jimmy would never stop. Or if he did, there wouldn't be anything to look forward to. Not his humiliation, not my praise, not even the sanctuary of my bedroom.

"Jimmy," one of them said. "Stop. Oh my god."

Mr. Harris yelled. Jimmy got one more good kick in before the emergency buzzing sounded from the back exit. I was drifting. There was no comfort ahead. Isaiah and my family and my fantasies all belonged to yesterday. Things went black, and Rick said, "Oh my god, Steven. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry." I think by then I was bleeding.

I suppose there's a threshold for everybody. Even in Rick and Mark's cruelty, there was only so far they would go. Jimmy's threshold was in a different place. For Jimmy Bancroft, it was something else entirely.

I know that now, at least. But even if I had known that then, I don't know if anything would have been different. Maybe it would have been worse.

In high school, before we graduated, went to separate colleges, and never saw each other again, I heard a rumor that Jimmy Bancroft was in jail (I also heard once that he shot himself) and told Isaiah that I felt guilty. He told me not to. No one can really control those things. It wasn't me, and even if the incident on the bus didn't happen, something else would have.

"Sometimes you think stuff is your fault," he said. "Even when it's not. So you've got to forgive yourself, especially when it's not your fault, because no one

else can do it.”

“That’s corny,” I said.

Isaiah had said other things about it, but I can’t remember what they were.

# Fakie and Switch

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by Tracy Hayes Odena

We were what? Fifteen? Sixteen? Who the hell knows, check it out: Arvin Bender was a power-dork with bad glasses, braces—the whole bit. He hung around us non-stop even though we gave him hell until it got boring. He wore this black trench coat all the time, even in the middle of summer, and it had all these spots on it where it had ripped and someone had tried to save it with Frankenstein stitches. Every Friday he'd sport the same "Get High on Life" T-shirt. He reeked of hot dogs and the cheap evergreen incense his mom sold at the dollar store. The kid was a total misfit. I mean, we were all misfits, but he was like the *emperor* of the misfits. One look at Bender and you just knew he never outgrew magic tricks. He had a ton of black hair that was half curly, half straight all meshed together in a thick, dark helmet. Sometimes he'd talk in trucker CB lingo. We'd all be sitting around and out of nowhere the dude would say, "I hear ya good buddy. I feel your 10-20" and then he'd wink at you and you'd have no idea what just happened so you'd fake a coughing fit, or pretend to tie your shoe just to un-queer the energy. He carried this black book bag with a sci-fi patch on it. It was some picture of a wizard looking into a crystal ball or some crap. He called the bag a "satchel," and it looked like something a hobbit would carry. It was jammed full

with notebooks and drawings. I mean the guy could draw; I have to give him that. What I'm saying is that he didn't exactly score a lot with the chicks.

The first time I saw him he was walking down the main hill at the reservoir. The Rez was the only place we could skate without the cops hounding us. If they did come around, all the hills made it easy to ditch them if you had enough warning. At the top of the Rez was a huge grassy field but the sides and bottom were all concrete, a skateboarder's dream.

Lee's older brother would buy a case of Coors for us on the weekends if we floated him some extra cash, and we'd hide the beer in the sludge-green water. Every day after school we'd blast The Circle Jerks and fly through the air as we cranked out ollies and nollies and ghetto birds. Sometimes on the weekends we even slept there.

The day we met Bender I'd been watching Peterson trying to do a no-comply 180 when Bender walked right out in front of him so that he totally bailed—just sent the board flying. Peterson landed on his face and practically had sparks shooting off of his teeth. His skateboard missed Bender's head by a millimeter. Bender picked up the board all cool, like skateboards had been almost decapitating him his whole life. He walked up to Peterson and held it out. Peterson yanked it out of his hands, but before he could say anything, Bender turned around, walked to the bottom of a hill, popped a squat and started drawing. After that stunt it was obvious the kid wasn't going anywhere.

\* \* \*

I'm not pointing fingers or anything but if anyone

was to blame for the whole Bender thing it was the girls. I didn't even know the half of it until the night it went down. Hell, I still have questions. I do know that if Teena and Jules hadn't pretended to like him, he never would've stuck around. They'd flirt with him like crazy just to watch him squirm. It was a game. Most of us guys just ignored him. The girls made it seem like they couldn't get enough of him. They'd sit and pose for his drawings—fluffing their hair, looking serious, looking sexy, looking stupid. When he'd hand them the picture they'd be all, "Wow, I bet you'll be a famous artist some day," and all this crap. The punk vibe of the Rez had turned into a sixth grade girls' slumber party. No shit, we half expected "Light as Feather, Stiff as a Board" to bust out any minute. This one day Hamster's all, "Why is he here? He doesn't even skate." (Hamster had these beady little eyes and was kind of round, the name just stuck.)

So I said, "Yeh, but he makes us look cooler, right?"

"I don't know," he said. "The girls sure seem to think he's the shit." He jerked his head over to what had become "their spot."

I turned around to see Teena running her fingers through Bender's hair like they were auditioning for a goddamn shampoo commercial. She laughed when one of her skull rings got caught in his mop. Jules was re-stringing her Docs with neon green laces. She looks up at the two of them and goes, "You guys are so cute together." Bender turned like forty shades of red and bolted home.

For a fake-out it looked pretty damn real. I just couldn't wrap my head around it. I mean, Teena was smokin' hot. She had white-blond hair down to her ass and huge green eyes that could stop you cold if

you could see them through all the black shit she caked on. She was more hippie than punk with these shirts as long as dresses. She just had this cool vibe. What I mean is that she had her pick of any guy in the world. Did Bender actually believe she'd choose him?

As far as Jules, she wasn't technically my girlfriend, but we did fool around an awful lot. I pictured double dates and crap and got pissed off. When I asked Jules about it later, she totally denied that Teena really had something for Bender. She blew it off completely: "As if."

This crap went on for weeks. I didn't catch a lot of it because Peterson had built a new half-pipe at the Rez and we were busy breaking it in. I'd been trying to teach Hamster how to do a boneless and the kid just wasn't getting it.

"Dude," I said. "Grab the board with your trailing hand—grab the inside rail, use your lead foot to jump, crank a 180 and land with both feet back on the board."

Total dead stare. I mean trying to teach those guys something worked my last nerve, but I wanted them to get it. Most of the guys had never touched a skateboard before they met me. I can safely say I showed every guy at the Rez and I mean EVERY guy there the most basic stuff, like how to ride fakie and switch. Not to brag, but these dudes looked up to me. Some of them got really good—like Mark Gonzales good—and could've gone pro but instead they went to college or moved out of the neighborhood to get old somewhere else.

Here's the thing: I don't know if the dance plan was Jules's idea or Teena's, I just know it wasn't mine. They thought it would be hilarious to have Teena ask Bender to go to Homecoming. I didn't want to be involved from the word go. I knew the dance

would be lame and I wasn't going to go whether Bender was going or not. Jules kept telling me how kick-ass it would be but I held my ground. She started bitching about how all we do is sit around a stupid cesspool and watch dudes fall on the ground. It was like all of a sudden we were thirty years old and married and I had to listen to this crap. She said she was done with the Rez. I told her no one had a gun to her head and she stormed off and didn't come back for a week. When she finally showed up again, she handed me two homecoming tickets. They were little blue books with these cheesy sailboats on the front. Under the boat it said, "Come Away With Me." I told her no way. Straight up. The thing is she knew I'd never go, so why'd she buy them? Because it was all part of the plan, that's why. I made some lame joke about putting a canoe in the Rez water and she had a hissy and walked over to Bender and Teena and chucked the tickets at them. I scoped Bender as he looked at the tickets. He started getting all methy and weirded-out and then Teena leaned over and whispered something in his ear.

I might've razzed him a little about the dance. It was a long time ago. I can't remember every single, solitary detail. If I did say anything it was only to help him out. You know, so he didn't get his hopes up about Teena.

\* \* \*

The night of the dance Jules told me she saw Teena's sister at Kmart and she told her Teena was in lockdown at her parents' house because they busted her trying to sneak out the night before. I figured if she was grounded, she wasn't going to the dance with

Bender, but I didn't bring it up because I didn't want Jules to start in again, begging me to go. Plus, it was really none of my damn business what those two did. Like I said, they just hung out at the same places I did.

We were pounding Coors and skating and Jules was flipping through an old copy of *Thrasher*, all pissy and bored. Peterson got up and started doing this killer imitation of a jock dancing at Homecoming, kicking his skinny legs from side to side, snapping his fingers. He looked like a half-crazed rooster, clucking his mohawk to the beat. He started singing, "Wake Me Up, Before You Go-Go," at the top of his lungs. Then, as if someone had flipped a switch, the night became surreal.

We saw the lights from the bottom of the hill. They lit up the suburban sky like a giant disco ball spinning and streaming. Within a minute they were on us. Jules dumped out the beer in the grass and dudes booked in all directions. I saw Hamster jet, hiding his face with his board, his Vision Streetwear stickers reflecting back at me, Converse going mach ten. Jules whipped a pack of gum at me and ran off into the weeds. Somehow it was understood that I was going to do all the talking. I popped some gum in my mouth and just stood there. I had no reason to run. I wasn't guilty of anything. They put their spotlight on me and I was as good as blind. So I stood there and tried to figure out what the hell was going on. I remember I actually heard her before I saw her. Her screams—howling like a goddamn battle cry—echoed and slid off all the cement around us.

It was Bender's mom.

She was barefoot in a purple nightgown. She waved her arms above her head and gasped for air in



between words. “This is your fault! All of you!” and the cops tried to put her back in the car but she wasn’t having any of it. She screamed, “His blood is on your hands!” and I wondered who the hell beat up Bender, and why they assumed it was me when the cop took out his megaphone and said, “We see you, Finkel. We just want to talk to you.”

I tried to walk all casual up to them. Bender’s mom stared at me with these wild eyes and her chest huffing. Then she lunged at me and pulled me down to the ground by my hair. By my hair. Then this other cop grabbed her around her waist and shoved her into the back of the squad car. The other cop—the name on his badge said Brady—he led me behind the car.

“There’s been an incident,” Brady whispered to me. More like hissed at me, if you want to know the truth. I heard Bender’s mom screaming in the car, she’d turned around to face me and was banging on the glass, pointing at me through the back window. I did a quick scan of the Rez and it was a cemetery. No one. Everything started to go in slow-mo and it was all still except for Bender’s mom shaking the car, twisting and turning around in her seat, trying to have another go at me.

“Do you know Arvin Bender?” Brady asked me, shining his Maglight in my face. That was pretty over the top—the Maglight—I mean the whole place looked like it was lit up with a thousand pop-flashes from an old Polaroid.

“Sort of,” I said. “I mean he hangs around.”

Then Brady looked at the car and back to me and whispered, “Well, tonight Arvin was hanging around from a rope in his bedroom. You know anything about that?”

I stood there until I felt Brady’s hands clamp down

around my neck. He steered me toward Bender's mom. I felt my shoes inch into the dirt in a slow trudge to the car. It felt like the walls of the Rez were sliding, shifting back and forth, and I could barely keep my balance. Bender's mom was hugging the seat in front of her, bawling, her electrocuted curls shaking in her shadow. The police radio kicked out static messages that seeped through the windows and the whole Rez was frozen-still around me, wet grass and crickets amplified like they had a Marshall stack, and I put my hand on the door but couldn't force myself to get into the car or even look at her, the whole time thinking I'd trade places with Bender in a flippin' heartbeat.

# Amanda's Garden

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by Eliza Horn

He hacked and pounded his chest, trying to release the seed from his throat. He leaned over and his eyes watered. Finally, he swallowed it. "You know they have seedless watermelon," he said to her without looking at her.

They were sitting on her apartment's balcony, overlooking a cracking ocean of pavement and parked cars. "That shit is unnatural," Amanda said. She spat a seed between her lips and over the railing.

He was annoyed that she wouldn't even consider it, but she wasn't his girlfriend, so he guessed she didn't owe him that much. The rules for fuck buddies were always ambiguous, which was why it worked for him. She was damn hot though, sitting there with her legs spread and her feet on the rail. "You want to go inside?"

"Nah," she said, wrapping those cherry lips, red and full and soft, around the edge of the melon, biting and chewing and swallowing, and then spitting seeds into the lot.

"Why did you tell me to come over then?" he said, not believing her, but knowing that this was sometimes the game he had to play. She'd pretend she didn't want it because she was so tired of being alone. She said she felt alone even when he was with her and she hated it. She didn't want him to pay for dinner or take her to nice hotels or wrap a ring around

her finger, she only wanted to share stories about how he got the scar next to his eye or her scar under her chin and talk about how shitty their parents were and how screwed up their last relationships had been, which was why they both got sucked into this in the first place because his girlfriend got hooked on coke and her boyfriend was just looking for a mother, and how they should appreciate each other as each other with all their scars and bruises and failures. He would tell her that what they had now was all he could give and that he was messed up and that he wouldn't care if she found someone else. If she really wanted all of those things—making breakfast in bed, cuddling at night, tracing each other's freckles and whatnot—she should be looking for someone else. Then he'd threaten to leave. Sometimes she'd let him get as far as the hall before she'd come after him, wrap her arms about him and say I want you to stay.

She spat another seed over the balcony. She fell back against the lawn hair and her red hair, wavy and tangled, reached her pointed shoulders.

"You know," he said, "that's gross. Can't you just swallow them?"

She wrapped her lips around the edge of the slice. A droplet of juice dribbled down her chin. He wanted to lean over and lick it away but the back of her hand got to it before he even moved.

"Well," she said, "maybe one of them will drop in one of those cracks and it'll rain and it'll start to grow and before you know it there'll be baby watermelons growing in the parking lot." The muscles in her tan legs tensed as she leaned over to spit another one, and then relaxed as she leaned back. She tugged her cut-off jean shorts so they covered a few more centimeters of her thigh.

“Is that why you buy seeded watermelon?” he asked. He took another bite, his teeth scraping the rind. “Why do you got to make everything so complicated?” A seed lodged itself between his teeth. “God-damn it.” He stuck his finger in to free it. He dropped his remaining watermelon slice down beside him. The rind cracked in two, staining her white balcony floor with pink droplets. “Okay, I’m tired. Let’s go inside.”

“No,” she said, still facing the parking lot, tracing the railing with her big toe.

He stood up. “You want to plant your watermelon garden?”

“Maybe,” she said.

He laughed and glared down at her. “You know that’s like a one in a million chance?”

She looked up at him for the first time that day. Her eyes sometimes had caramel flecks that he only noticed when he was staring at her intensely, like when he was above her, feeling her belly moving in and out right before she came. Her head would angle back, her body still for a moment before her toes would curl towards the soles of her feet. And then she would close her eyes and smile. He would kiss her eyelids, then to her lips, her neck, to each breast, and then to her heart so he could feel the rush of blood that he had inspired.

He turned and opened the door from the balcony back into her apartment. “Ready?”

She shook her head and stared back into the parking lot. Her legs dropped from the railing and her knees curled underneath her chin. Then she leaned her head back towards the dimming sky. “I need something that I can sink my teeth into.”

“Well, finish your watermelon then,” he said, knowing what she meant. He did not want to have

this conversation right now. It was just like those damn seeds, just there to interrupt what was otherwise something delicious.

“I’m serious,” she said, glancing up at him while one finger twirled a strand of hair.

“I told you I can’t be that for you,” he said. His body was humming as he watched her index finger circle the strand. He wanted to speed this fight up. “I guess I should go then.” He walked inside and across her living room, just fast enough so it didn’t seem obvious that he was waiting for her.

He reached the door knob and inched it around until the door popped open. She was really going to make him leave the apartment. Well, fine, he would, and he slammed the door behind him. He walked down the hall and pressed the elevator button, just for good measure, just to show her that he was serious and she shouldn’t keep trying to pull this shit with him because one day he really would leave. He waited to hear her door open and have her thin arms wrap about him, dragging him back inside.

The elevator dinged with its arrival. She’d probably call to him from her balcony. This would really show her how serious he was about leaving. He walked out of the elevator, through the lobby, and into the parking lot. He wouldn’t even look up, but just wait for her to call to him. He meandered towards his car, waiting for any sound from her.

He glanced down, trying to find his keys in his pocket but not really wanting to find them. And there, next to his shoe, wedged between the cracks of the pavement, sprawling on a mattress of dirt was a watermelon seed.

# Headache

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by Tunji Ajibade

No one beyond Iso-Pako visited Pa and Ma and I, until Grandma arrived. Then Uncle Pate came, and Auntie Ilali, and Juwa, my friend. I knew why Juwa came. He arrived months before the others, and he came because of me, and he asked me questions about Iso-Pako: why we walked on sawdust, and lived in houses made of wood planks with rusted iron sheets for roofs. Juwa asked me questions about Grandma also. He asked why he rarely saw her outside since she arrived at our house, why she cried all day long, and why she came to our house at all.

I told Juwa about how Ma and Pa got married. But I did not tell him why Grandma had come to our house, because Ma said I should not tell anyone. Juwa told me about his mother and father, about his father's work and about his mother's work, and he showed me his father's private library with books that were as big as my head, and the four cars that his father parked on the premises of their house at Grovesnor's Lane.

Juwa and I sat together on a stone in front of our house one day, and as I thought of Grandma who was in Ma and Pa's bedroom, I could see the pink high-rise that loomed above and behind rusted roofs, and far away in Grovesnor's Lane. I knew it had Juwa's apartment on its tenth floor. As I tried to count which

floor was the tenth, Juwa's Queen's English blocked my thought.

"Let's see whose stone can reach that dog." Then he threw a stone and shouted, "It's a goal!" He placed a finger on the frame of his glasses and pushed them back up his nose.

Juwa told me he was born in London, but I already knew it. I knew the first day I saw him on the football pitch, with his light brown skin, and his words that came through his nose like the newscasters that I watched on SKY TV in Segzy Restaurant.

I said, "It cannot be a goal because, one: the stone landed near the dog's feet. And two: you cheated. You didn't wait for me to get set before you played."

\* \* \*

"You can throw your own when you are ready."

"We need to agree on the rules before the game starts. There are rules to any game. If we abide by the rules, then we can talk about a fair victory." I knew in my mind I quoted the words of the spokesperson for *Democracy Advocates*, an NGO group that once came to sensitize us at Iso-Pako Community High School.

Juwa said, "Okay, there is only one rule. Don't lean forward when you throw, or you will be disqualified."

"An adjustment: whoever leans forward will only lose the point for that set, even if the stone gets to the dog."

The dog belonged to Zico, one of the boys on Obama Street, and it once ate my *okete*, the one I killed near the shed at the sawmill where Pa had his office. I had wondered at the time what the *okete* ate,



whether it ate sawdust at the sawmill, because it was fat, and it pained me when the dog ate it up after I had disemboweled it and placed it on Ma's fireplace to roast. I had planned to give Juwa a part of the okete meat, so that he would eat okete for the first time and say "Oh, it tastes so nice," as he said the day I gave him *sobo* to drink. He said *sobo* was better than processed juice, a pack of which he took to school everyday. I never told him that he missed the okete that I had planned to give him. I thought it was good Juwa repaid the dog for its greed if he threw stones and hit it. Juwa threw a stone after we agreed on the rules. The stone was still in the air, on its way, when the dog got up and walked away. I laughed.

Juwa said, "Why did you laugh?"

A car came round the corner, up on Obama Street. I saw it because it was the first car to come to our street since I returned from school and sat on the stone where Juwa met me. It was a Range Rover, which Juwa called "Reindz," and was one of his father's cars. Its big tires, with treads as wide as my thumb, were covered in sawdust like the undersides of my school sandals.

The car stopped on the street, and its occupant spoke to a woman who sat in front of a house with a tray that had loaves of bread she sold. The woman raised a hand, and pointed down the street. The car rolled. I said, "Juwa, see Range," and I bent over to look at the underside of my sandals, the sandals Ma bought for me after I had been given six lashes of the cane at school, accused of coming to school with bare feet. I removed the sandal on my right foot and banged its underside on the ground, on the layers of sawdust that was our ground. Sawdust could pass for earth anywhere in Iso-Pako, except that shoes and

sandals picked it where it felt like foam under the feet, where it had not been trodden for years.

Range rolled to a halt and it was parked across the street, opposite the stone on which Juwa and me sat. A man came down from the car and closed the door. He was in the middle of the street before he pressed a button in his hand. I heard the car's *kuun*. The man walked over to us.

He said, "Hello boys. Where is Pa James' house here?"

I pointed to the wooden house behind me and said, "That is it."

My eyes followed him to the door, before I turned around to look at the car again. "I think he is my mother's brother," I said to Juwa as the man knocked on the door and stepped into the house.

Juwa laughed. I turned to look at him, the same way I had looked at Mama the day she said that her brother lived in J-Town, but she would never go and beg him for anything. Pa was sick at the time, and he was on a bed in the only clinic in Iso-Pako. Mama had stayed with him for three days, and for three days she didn't sell roasted corn in front of our house. Nurses said Pa needed more drugs, that Ma would have to pay another one thousand naira for the drugs.

When I returned home from school one day, I found that there was not a single cup of garri in the house, so I went to see Ma at the clinic. I had sat on a bench at the clinic, my head on its plywood wall, and watched Ma cry. I didn't ask her not to cry, as my mind was filled with garri. I began to think that I should have gone to Juwa's house. I calculated if I would meet Juwa at lunch. I couldn't, it was too late. He would have had his lunch, and sat down to do his homework, after which he would go to the football

pitch. I tried to recollect the last time we both ate from the almond fruit tree behind their house, whether the tree would have ripe almonds, or if it had already grown tiny, white flowers, after which green stony fruits would stick out among the leaves. I thought of the mango tree, too. But I knew those trees had nothing on them. I had climbed the branches and searched under their leaves for mangoes the last time Juwa and I played behind their house.

My mind was still on what else I could eat when I heard Ma say, as she sobbed, that the only person who had the money she needed to buy drug for Pa was her brother who lived in J-Town, a thing that made me turn to look at her, my eyeballs out as though a lion had roared, and was on its way to where I stood, frozen to a spot.

Ma's brother lived in J-Town? My first thought was that I didn't hear Ma well. Then I thought maybe her cry did not let her think the way she should. Ma's brother in J-Town? I was in Class Two in Iso-Pako Community High School, but Ma never mentioned it to me that she had a brother, though she had said Grandma didn't want her to marry Pa and that everyone had sided with Grandma. Ma had also mentioned Auntie Ilali, but I never met her, not until after Grandma came to our house one night, crying, pleading with Ma that she had to stay with us in our one bedroom and parlour, or else Ma would have a corpse to bury.

My eyes were still on Juwa after he laughed and I said, "Do you think I don't know why you laughed?"

He stopped and looked at me, "Why, do you think I laughed?"

I said, "Tell the truth."

But he laughed again.

I turned my back to him, my face squeezed together.

Juwa said, “I thought it was a joke, like the April fool you played on me that time.”

I jumped to my feet and laughed, *haa-haa-haa, heee-heee-heee*. Juwa stared at me, the way he did whenever I won one of our arguments. I laughed like that each time I remembered the April fool thing, and it was one way I got him to go on his knees. We were on the football pitch on that day, the day of the April fool. No, I was on the football pitch, on Grovesnor’s Lane. We all met at the pitch, we boys from Iso-Pako and boys from Grovesnor’s Lane. We walked some two kilometers to the pitch, but they stepped out of their houses, their highrise, and walked across their mowed lawns, across the street, to the pitch. Juwa was in soccer boots that day when we met at the pitch for the first time, red soccer boots with black stripes, the type I saw on the feet of Ramirez of Chelsea FC, England, and which made my eyelids open and close like the wings of a pigeon that had just taken off. We played five against five, and my team won the first set. One of us left, and as the captain I was to select another player among those waiting for their turn to play. Everyone raised their hands when I looked at those seated at the steps of the classrooms of the Elementary school that had closed for the day. I had stared at Juwa’s red boots and I couldn’t turn away from them. I pointed at him.

Juwa missed passes and gave wrong passes, but I sent the ball his way all the time. I didn’t know why I passed the ball to him, I just did, and then stared at the boots as their owner tried to dribble past opponents. He would fall on his buttocks, *gbaam!* and then raise his hands up, to indicate a foul, a thing the referee ignored.

Juwa's cheeks were round, and I imagined he had butter and bread to eat every day. This made me wish I lived in the same house with him in Grovesnor's Lane. He was my height, the height our Games Master at Iso-Pako Community High School said qualified me for the 200 Meters Junior Boys relay team. I suspected we were the same age, too. Like me, he was in Class Two, at St. Gregory International College.

When Juwa continued to lose the ball to opponents on that first day, and we conceded the first goal, I had turned to look at Juwa's house, the pink high-rise that was across the street from the Elementary school and said, "Juwa, your mother is calling you." He had turned to look at the front of the house, looked at me, and said, "Mum called me?" to which I said, "Yes." Then he shouted, "Mum! Mum has come!" and ran away from the pitch, out of the premises of the Elementary School; his bare legs that had no *yam* on the calf were hardly lifted off the ground as he ran *kiti-kata-kiti-kata*.

I selected another player. We scored the first goal, scored the second, and won the set before Juwa returned. I shouted, "April fool!" when he returned and he had said, "You are a bad boy, and I am going to report you to my Dad. I thought you said my Mum has returned." He breathed in short gasps, his chest moved up and down as he spoke, because he had just climbed the staircase ten floors up and down again. He walked me halfway home when we left the pitch that day.

I was still laughing about April Fool when I turned around to see Pa up the street. He was on his way back from work, from his office, his office at the sawmill that was made of wood, where he worked for the Sawmillers Association, Iso-Pako Branch. I had leafed through his files, and I knew he kept records of

old and new members, took minutes of their weekly meetings, wrote letters on their behalf, as well as kept a book of the monthly dues each member paid, or had not paid. Pa's eyes were on the Range as soon as he turned the corner on Obama street, I could see.

I said, "Welcome, Pa," and took the bag he had under his arm, the bag that made boys on Obama street name Pa *Baba Alajo*, collector of voluntary contributions. I had threatened to report them to Pa, but I never did. I didn't because I was among them whenever we called Alhaji Rauf Owodunni, *Agboworin*. We gave him the name because Alhaji Rauf always carried in his hand a jute bag, the size of my school bag, which we imagined contained all the money he made each day at *Alhaji Rauf Owodunni Wood Industry*.

Pa said, "Na who get dat car?"

"The Range Rover Jeep, you mean? Its owner is in our house."

Pa said, "Pate dey for *ma* house?"

"Uncle Pate? Maybe he is the one."

"Na 'im. Na Pate. I know 'im car well-well. Even if I dey sleep *sef*, I go no say na 'im car be dat. 'E dey drive am pass the main street wey dey de oder side of ma office. I dey see am all de time, but 'e no dey see me."

Juwa said, "Good afternoon, sir."

"Oh, ma boy. How you dey? You come see ya friend, eh?"

"Yes, sir."

"How ya Papa?"

"Dad is doing fine, sir."

"And ya Mama?"

"Mum's cool."

"Good, good. Good boy. Your friend don give you *sonting* chop?"

Juwa looked at me, and I said, “Pa, there is nothing in the house that I can give...”

Pa’s forehead came up with lines as he spoke to me, thick lines like those that showed near his nostrils each time Ma said that there was no more palm oil to cook *okro*.

Pa said, “You don’t be silly. You don ask me, and I no give you money make you take buy *sonting* for ya friend? You never ask me, you say *noting dey* for house.”

Then he turned to Juwa and smiled. “Good boy, I go send your friend, make ’e go buy you *meneral* wey you go drink. I know you like *meneral*, eh?”

Juwa nodded his head, as he lifted his right foot up to stand on his left. Then he lifted his left leg and stood on his right, his hands locked behind his back.

Pa put his hand in the pocket of his shirt. His tie got in the way, and he brushed it aside. He removed his hand from his breast pocket and put it in the pocket of his trousers. He shook each of the two pockets as though he wanted to brush away an ant that had bitten him down under.

Pa turned to me and said, “C’mon, bring ma bag.” I gave the bag to him, and he searched. When he gave me a fifty naira note, he said, “E get de *meneral* wey dem dey sell for forty naira, eh? Na dat one you go buy.”

“It is the one that is fifty naira that Mama Kudira has.”

“You don’t be silly. Na only Mama Kudira dey sell *meneral*? Go anoda place go buy. Make sure you bring back ma balance o.”

Pa walked towards the house after he told Juwa, “Wait for ya friend, you hear? ’E go come back now?”

I waited for Pa to enter the house, and I beckoned to Juwa to come with me.

Juwa said, “Is your Mum not at home?”

“She is inside the house with Grandma.”

“I should thank her for what she gave me last week. My Dad said I should thank her, too.”

I laughed.

“What’s funny?” Juwa asked, pushing his eyeglasses back over his nostrils.

“Nothing.”

I didn’t want Juwa to know the problem Ma had with Pa over the bottle of honey that she gave him. The day Ma gave Juwa the honey, Pa had sat on his wooden deckchair outside our house, his torso bare, after he returned from work. He had said, “Vero, wey ma dinner?”

Dinner was the only meal Pa ate in the house each day because he left for his office early. But he would call for his dinner as though it was semolina and vegetable with crayfish, as if it was the kind of meal I ate in Juwa’s house.

“Vero, wey ma dinner?” Pa repeated.

Ma pushed me along where she sat near the fireplace; there was a bowl in my right hand that had cassava *fofofo* the size of my fist, and a bowl in my left hand that had *orunla* soup from chopped, dried okro.

“Take de food go give ya Papa,” Ma said with a smile on a corner of her mouth. “Or you no hear say hunger dey catch am?” Her voice sounded as though the meal was ready long ago and I had refused to take it to him.

“Vero,” Pa called after I had placed the bowls on the table in front of him. He had leaned out of his deckchair towards the table. He lifted a side of the bowl of *orunla*; a thing that made the soup flow to one side like saliva that draws away from the lips slowly, and in a long line.



“Vero,” Pa called again.

“Eh, na me be dis,” Ma said as she stood before Pa’s table. “Wetin happen?”

“You ask me wetin happen, eh?” Pa looked up and said. “Wetin be dis?” He tilted the bowl of soup towards Ma.

Ma said, “No be soup be dis?”

“Soup without meat?”

“You no give me money to buy meat.”

“Ehn, you no sell *anytin* today?”

“I don take de money do sonting.”

“Wetin you take de money do?” Pa asked.

“I buy honey.”

“Honee? Wetin you want take honee do?”

“I want chop am.”

“Ehn, so you wan’ begin dey enjoy honee for dis house. But me, make I dey take soup without meat, eh? Okay go bring de honee. Make I pour my own for dis soup. Dat mean say na honee be ma meat today.”

I knew Pa would seize the bottle of honey, if Ma ever gave it to him.

Ma said, “I no go give you out of my honey.”

“Ehn, na so?”

Ma said, “Na so.”

Ma didn’t have the bottle of honey, and she didn’t tell Pa that she had given the honey to Juwa because she told me, “na *opaka* ya Papa go dey talk.”

I had sat on the stone in front of our house with Juwa in the afternoon one month before then. A *mala* walked down Obama Street with a covered bowl on his head, and two bottles of honey in his hands. He came to Juwa and me, and told us to taste his honey and, maybe decide to buy. Ma had shouted to me and Juwa from where she sat roasting her corns, “No be original honey, make you no taste am o.” She then

promised Juwa a bottle of “original” honey, a promise she fulfilled a month after she made it, a month during which I knew she saved money from the roasted corns she sold.

I bought soft drink for Juwa, and as we headed back for the house, he said, “Your grandma.”

I looked at Juwa, and I waited for him to continue.

“It seems to me that I saw her on TV sometimes in the past.”

“Maybe. She works with the Election Commission.”

“Yeah, now I remember. I thought she has some connections with election matters, but I was not so sure. There is this news about one State Electoral Commissioner who refused to declare the results of the election he supervised. Or is the Commissioner a she? I can’t immediately recollect. But it’s been in the news for days.”

I said, “Ehn,” and said nothing more.

Ma told me what happened, and she said I should not tell anyone that Grandma had come to hide in our house. Ma was the third and the last of Grandma’s three children, and I think she could not be older than my school Principal who marked her thirty-sixth birthday when we resumed the new school term. Ma did not go to school like Uncle Pate and Auntie Ilali. Their father died a month after Ma was born, and Grandma did not have money to send all the three children to school. Uncle Pate and Auntie Ilali had scholarships from the missionaries at the parish where Grandma worshipped, and that was how both attended Universities in London. They had returned at the time Ma met Pa. Grandma, Uncle Pate and Auntie Ilali said Ma would not marry Pa because he was a houseboy, and he had no money.

Ma ran away with Pa, they did a court wedding, and when I was born five years after, Ma sent a message to Grandma. Grandma showed up at Iso-Pako, saw me, and that was the last time she ever came in the last ten years ago. When one of Grandpa's friends was elected the state governor four years ago, he had Grandma, whose only educational qualification was Elementary School Leaving Certificate, appointed as the State Electoral Commissioner. She conducted a governorship election three weeks ago, and said that some people threatened to kill her if she would not announce a falsified result in favor of the Governor, and so she fled. "My conscience would not let me announce a falsified result," she had explained to Ma.

Ma told me that those who wanted to kill Grandma would not know she came to our house. Grandma had been in our house for two weeks. Auntie Ilali came and I heard her tell Grandma that she should go and announce whatever results her subordinates gave her, after which she could resign her appointment. Grandma had said she would not, and Auntie Ilali had said it was in the news that Grandma embarrassed the government with her action, and that she was a Wanted Person. Auntie Ilali came to our house every day since Grandma arrived. I knew she told Uncle Pate to come and see Grandma, and I was sure she wanted him to tell her to announce falsified results.

"Sit and wait for me," I said to Juwa. "Let me give Pa the balance of his money." I pointed to the stone, when we returned to the house. I walked past a Mercedes Benz, Auntie Ilali's car, that had been parked in front of the house before I returned with Juwa.

I walked into the sitting room, to the door of the bedroom, and stopped. I didn't know how many of

the people inside the bedroom were crying. I thought I heard Ma's voice, but it could have been Auntie Ilali, the two spoke and cried the same way, I had since discovered. Both resembled each other, though Ma with her straight legs and narrow hips looked like she could contest for Miss Universe and win, a thing Auntie Ilali would not dare do with her wide mouth, either side of which had deep lines, and her wide hips and the legs that made me think of the legs of an elephant. Sometimes, I thought she should have been the one married to Pa, instead of Ma, except that the top of her head could only reach a point below Pa's chest. And I didn't want her to be my mother because when she spoke to me she carried her nose up like a cat that sniffed the air for fish. She also carried her fingers, with talons painted in red, as if they should never touch firewood, wash plates, cut okro with a knife, stir orunla soup on fire, and dish food for me and Pa. Ma told me Auntie Ilali was never married, and that her boyfriend of many years went away with another woman. Ma didn't say why Auntie Ilali's boyfriend went away with another woman, but I felt I knew why.

Where I stood outside the door of the bedroom, I could hear Grandma as she cried. It was the only thing she had been doing since she arrived our house. I knew her voice, tiny, like a child's. I thought her voice did not match her height. She was as tall as my teacher who liked to boast that he had the longest legs at six feet and that he would beat every other teacher, like he did the last time the teachers ran a 100-meter dash during our Inter-House Sports Competition. Ma cried each time Grandma did, and she had also told Grandma to go and announce the results since the time Auntie Ilali came and said government officials

warned her to tell Grandma to come out of hiding. I could hear Aunty Ilali's voice as she spoke, telling Grandma to save the family name, that Grandma had nothing to lose, since she would only announce results her subordinate in the field said were the true results. I could hear Uncle Pate's voice too, as he repeated what Aunty Ilali said.

I did not enter the bedroom, because Pa would shout at me for coming in to disturb elders who were busy. I walked outside and sat beside Juwa; he held the half-drunk bottle of his soft drink in his hand. He coughed and rubbed a finger on his eyeballs under his glasses, then pushed the glasses back on his nose. I turned in the direction of the sawmill.

Work was still on at the sawmill. I saw boys pull a log across the blade of a machine. They split logs under the shed with a signboard that read, *Alhaji Rauf Owodunni Wood Industry*. Zico in his Yellow Brazil's football team's T-shirt, lifted a split plank of wood from the machine, carried it to a pile under the shed that had the signboard, *Uncle Semiu International Wood Ltd*. I heard as the engine of the wood-splitting machines did *koto-koto-koto*, and sent smoke in the air, smoke that looked like a piece of black cloth flailing in the wind. The heap of sawdust a few yards to the sheds was on fire, and it sent up smoke.

Juwa coughed again, a thing that reminded me of Alhaji Rauf Owodunni. He was the Chairman of saw millers in Iso-Pako, and Pa's office was under his shed. Alhaji Rauf died two months ago. Pa said his lungs were bad. I sometimes went to see Pa at his office. I never met Alhaji Rauf with a stick of cigarette, but he always coughed *poho-poho*, and since he died, I had wondered how the lung of a man who did not smoke could make him die.

After Juwa took the last drop of his soft drink I said, “Let’s go to your house.”

He stood up. I stood up, too.

He said, “Won’t you tell your parents?”

“They won’t mind.”

Juwa said, “My Mum and Dad would mind.”

His father and mother would mind, I knew. His father was a High Court Judge, and his mother worked for an NGO in London. She only came to Grovesnor’s Lane on holidays, and Juwa had lived with her until his father said he wanted the youngest of his four children to come and live with him. A maid came in during the day, took care of the house, cooked the meals, and left in the evening. Juwa was always on his own, and the day his father returned from office and found both of us playing Ben 10 on his computer, Juwa had looked up to say, “Dad, meet my friend, Dore.” Then he turned his attention back to the computer screen.

Juwa’s father had looked at me, a black robe and a white wig in one hand, a black bag in the other, and he had nodded to my “Good evening, sir” before he walked away from the living room.

As we walked along on Obama street with sawdust as earth under our feet, Juwa said, “I will go to London when the school goes on holidays.”

I was silent. Except for the power generators that did *voooooon* in front of houses on either side of Obama Street, and the children that ran after football and shouted, “See me here, pass the ball,” Juwa would have heard my heart as it did *gbum*.

On my way back home that evening, I dropped by at Segzy Restaurant to watch a football match between Real Madrid and my team, Chelsea. A newscaster was reading news on TV some five minutes to

the time the match was to start and I heard, “the Electoral Commissioner for Daubu State, Mrs. Cecilia Cyril, has said that she is committed to seeing the governorship election in the state to its logical conclusion.”

I shifted to the edge of my chair. “Mrs. Cyril said this today in a telephone chat with the National Chairman of the Electoral Commission during which she promised to promptly announce the results of the election that took place three weeks ago. It would be recalled that Mrs. Cyril had suddenly disappeared, giving rise to speculations that she...”

I got up from my seat and ran. At home, Ma told me that Uncle Pate and Aunty Ilali had gone away with Grandma, and Pa had grumbled, “dem don carry dem headache commot for ma house.”

# **Tok**

---

by Joshua Willey

The storm broke around the witching hour and by dawn a clear blue sky stretched out in every direction. He woke with a dog licking his face, its black nose cold and wet on his cheek, its whiskers (white on one side and black on the other) tickling his neck. It looked like a collie or a shepherd of some sort, black with a white blaze and withers and socks, but it also had the spots of a dalmatian on one side and icy blue eyes. By the time he was fully lucid it was gone. Dog-face looked at his friend, still fast asleep with the mummy bag pulled close around him. The trailer smelled like sawdust and after pulling on his boots he walked to the open end and looked out at the road. Not a soul in sight. He could see Gakona Junction, the intersection of the 1 (Anchorage to Tok) and the 4 (Valdez to the 2 towards Fairbanks and the northern towns like Circle, Coldfoot, Dawson, Deadhorse), the gas station beside it, and there was that dog, beside the gas station. He jumped down and pissed on a young pine and walked to the station though it was, technically, in the direction from which they'd come.

A toothless old prune sat inside, starring at a WWE fight on a small television. He was talking but it did not sound like a human language. When a woman emerged from the back room it became clear they were having a conversation.



“Now just where did you come from?” the woman asked Dog-face, looking around for a vehicle.

“Hitchin,” he said.

“Oh dear. Which way?”

“Whitehorse.”

“Well if you go straight up your on towards Fairbanks, course you turn at Delta Junction. Twice as far but more traffic. Turn right and it’s the Tok Cutoff. There ain’t nothing out there. Course once you hit Tok you’re close on the border. With Canada that is. Just go through Northway Junction.”

“Beggars can’t be choosers,” he said, smiling irreverently.

“Try tellin that to this one.” She gestured at toothless who was digging into a pouch of Levi Garrett.

“What you need honey? Coffee?”

“Coffee.”

“Yeah you got that look in your eye.”

“You take debit?”

“You go ahead, this one’s on Popeye here.”

“Much obliged.”

“You got a hound on your head!” toothless belated suddenly before spitting a brown lugi into a Mountain Dew can with the top opening ripped wide. Dog-face starred at the tooner, remembering how his brother had showed him to cover his thumb with his shirt and press on the can just so as not to cut yourself but leave a hole big enough to spit and not fill the gutter with juice.

“A hound on your head,” toothless said again. Dog-face blinked.

“He’s just fuckin crazy. Don’t worry ‘bout him,” the woman said, disappearing again into the back. Dog-face filled a large paper cup with French roast and slipped a heat shield sleeve around it, put a lid

on top, and walked back to the trailer. He set the coffee down in front of the sleeper's face and got his Bible from his pack and sat on the dirt, his back against a trailer tire, his feet propped on a rock, his body covered in the sunlight which was just gaining enough strength to be hot, and read a little Isaiah, turning to the Songs of the Suffering Servant, harbinger of the coming of Jesus.

After a few pages the sleeper came out, sipping the coffee, stretching. "God damn" he said. "Where are we?"

"Gakona Junction. 'Round Glenallen." Dog-face squinted up at the sleeper's back. His piss ricocheted off a rock and the drops caught the sun as they traced their little crescents of farewell.

"Glenallen. And how long we been out here?"

"Where?"

"How long we been gone?"

Dog-face scratched his head and closed the book. "Six months."

They stuffed their sleeping bags in their packs and walked to the Tok Cutoff. A cloud formation resembling a rib cage emerged from the west, pushed high into the air by the Alaska Range. The air was thick with that warm pine scent, also that far north feeling, a feeling of quiet, of clarity, an inkling that time is moving very slowly.

"We should split," the sleeper said. "I'll thumb towards Fairbanks and you thumb towards Tok. If anyone stops, ask if they can take the other guy too."

"And if they can't?"

"See ya in Tok."

"And if they're goin to Whitehorse?"

"See ya in Whitehorse."

"Oh I see how it is. Does this mean we're not friends anymore?"

“Come on.”

“Fine then.”

The sleeper walked ten yards down the gravel shoulder and dropped his pack. In the woods, in the shade, the grass was still wet from the rain. He toed a little roadside trash and sang. “I’ve been doin some hard travellin I thought you knowed, I’ve been goin to Fairbanks it’s just down the road, I’ve been sleepin in abandoned trailers workin on the fish docks fillin up brailers and I’ve been doin some hard travellin, lawd.”

Dog-face walked some yards the other way, down the Tok Cutoff, and hadn’t even dropped his pack before he heard the unmistakable sound of an automobile drifting across the stillness.

A tan Mercury Lynx rounded the corner near the gas station and the hitchers watched its slow progress in their direction, each wondering where it was headed, if it would stop, if they would ever see each other again. It turned at the Cutoff and drifted to a halt beside Dog-face. A man with a lazy eye hung out the passenger side window.

“Where to, eh?”

“Tok.”

“We’re going to Chistochina.”

“Where’s that?”

“Nowhere.” Lazy-eye leaned over to the driver, who had long hair down to his waist and wasn’t wearing a shirt, and laughed.

“Halfway to Tok,” Long-hair said.

“Will you take me and my buddy?”

“Looks like your buddy wants to go to Fairbanks.” Lazy-eye nodded in his direction.

“He’ll go to Chistochina.”

“For a six pack.”

“Of what?”

“Listen to this one,” Lazy-eye said to Long-hair.

“It’s halfway to Tok?”

“We just met and already I’m repeating myself,” Long-hair said, and winked.

“OK, lets go.” Dog-face climbed in the back and Long-hair swung it around and they picked up the sleeper. The car was warm and smelled sweetly of dust and smoke. They drove slowly down the straight two-lane blacktop with the anonymous wilderness stretching out on each side. The Wrangell Mountains guarded the horizon. The summit of Mt. Drum hovered above meadows of fireweed. Mt. Sanford, imposing and over 16,000 feet above sea level, its glacier-clad south face rose 8,000 feet off the plain.

“What you got on in Tok?” Lazy-eye asked.

“Hitch for Whitehorse,” the sleeper said.

“And then?”

“Edmonton. Winnipeg. Toronto. We’re open to suggestions.”

“Shit,” Long-hair suggested, “let’s get that six.”

Long-hair pulled up to a small store beside which a woman was sculpting a pine trunk with a hammer and a chisel. Dog-face went into the store with Lazy-eye. The sleeper got out and leaned against the Lynx with Long-hair, who lit a cigarette and shared it with him.

The store was a jumble of odd products: canned ravioli next to baby toys, shotgun cartridges next to jumper cables. Lazy-eye picked out a half rack of Molson.

“You said a sixer,” Dog-face objected.

“Hold on to yer brain, I’ll buy half, you buy half, OK?”

“OK.”

“Plus some rolling papers.”

“What?”

“Nevermind. Fuck the papers.” Lazy-eye spoke with the clerk in a language Dog-face didn’t recognize. Some form of Ahtna he figured as he handed the clerk a fiver and said “keep the change.” Then he remembered hearing there were less than a hundred Ahtna speakers, that the language was on the verge of extinction, though there had been a recent surge in effort of the younger generation to keep it alive.

They walked through the clean clap of the screen door into the sun, which seemed prematurely high to Dog-face. He blinked. “Where you from?” he asked.

“Northway.”

“Where’s that?”

“Passed Tok. Almost Yukon.”

“You like it?” Lazy-eye gave him an uncomprehending look and then clapped him on the shoulder and said “come on, we gotta make a quick stop.” They all got back in the car and Lazy-eye opened four beers and handed them around.

“Cheers,” he said. The Molson was cold and refreshing and immediately brought a tingle to the hitchers’ stomachs. Long-hair scanned the radio. Nothing but static.

They pulled off onto a dirt road and emerged swiftly into a clearing with a handful of trailer houses clustered around a bulldozer and a totem pole of sorts. Stopping in front of one, Long-hair knocked twice before killing the engine. A gaunt man emerged from behind a trailer’s metal door.

“Jerry!” Lazy-eye said. “That’s Jerry,” he said to the hitchhikers.

“Hi Jerry,” said the sleeper.

“These two are...” Lazy-eye made an exaggerated walking motion with his index and middle fingers. They went inside and sat on milk crates around a big slab of hand milled wood resting atop more milk crates.

“Got any papers?” Jerry asked.

“He was supposed to buy some.” Lazy-eye gestured at Dog-face.

“I got one,” Long-hair said. He took out his pack of cigarettes and removed the interior wrapping. He then very carefully separated the tin coating, producing a zigzag thin paper, which he proffered to Jerry. Jerry pulled a big bag of shake from behind his milk crate and rolled a joint. They passed it all around and the smoke sat perfectly still in the room with them. The sound of someone splitting wood pushed faintly through the thin walls. Lazy-eye said something in the mysterious Ahtna to Jerry, who got up and rifled through yet another milk crate full of what looked like garbage.

“What language are you guys speaking?” Dog-face asked the room.

“English. What language you speaking?” Long-hair replied, and winked.

Jerry sat back down with an empty peanut M&Ms bag and filled it with shake, stems, seeds and all. He handed it to Lazy-eye. “You like it here?” he asked the sleeper.

“Sure. Can’t improve on the work of the almighty.”

“Almighty,” Jerry repeated wistfully, seemingly to himself. He let out a long sigh.

Just as they were pulling away Lazy-eye jumped out with a beer and ran up to hand it to Jerry, on the trailer steps.

“Good luck,” Jerry said, but they couldn’t hear

him, only read his lips through the bug stained rear window. They regained the asphalt and Long-hair scanned the radio again. This time a crackling news station came in, albeit faint. Lazy-eye turned around and faced the hitchhikers.

“So whaddaya think?”

“Of what?” the sleeper asked.

“The car.”

“Oh. It’s nice. Is it yours?”

“Pretty smooth, huh?”

“Yeah.”

“Pretty smooth,” he said again, and ran his hand over the dash abstractedly. “Guess how much.”

“Two grand,” said Dog-face.

“Fifteen hundred,” Lazy-eye said. “Not bad eh? Fifteen hundred.”

“Pretty good,” the sleeper said. “How many miles on it?” But Lazy-eye didn’t answer, he’d pulled out the M&Ms bag.

“Got any papers?” The hitchers shook their heads, nearly laughing.

“Fuck the papers.” Lazy-eye opened another round of beers for everyone and smacked his lips. “Wanna try her out?”

“The car?” the sleeper said.

“Yeah.”

“Yeah.”

“OK.”

Long-hair pulled over and traded seats with the sleeper, who eased down the road.

“So whaddaya think?”

“Nice.”

“Pretty smooth?”

“Pretty smooth.”

“Not bad for fifteen hundred.”

“How much?” Dog-face asked, losing control of his laughter. Lazy-eye was undeterred.

“Fifteen hundred. Make a paper,” he said to Long-hair, who produced his cigarette pack and started separating the tin strip as before.

“Fuck the papers,” Dog-face said. The sleeper laughed. They smoked.

“Good homegrown,” Lazy-eye said.

“That’s shake,” said Long-hair.

“You wanna drive?” Lazy-eye asked Dog-face.

“Hell, yeah,” Dog-face said, his eyes bloodshot. They stopped in the middle of the abandoned road and switched.

“Whaddaya think?” Lazy-eye asked when they were rolling again.

“Pretty smooth, man, pretty smooth.”

“Guess how much?”

“Maybe fifteen hundred?”

“Fifteen hundred.”

“Not bad for fifteen hundred.”

“Good homegrown.”

“That’s shake.”

“Take a left,” Lazy-eye said.

“Where?”

“Here.” He gestured toward a dirt road. Dog-face turned off.

“What’s here?”

“Baseball game. Chistochina.”

“Out here?”

“Yes sir.”

“Pretty smooth.”

They dropped though some tall pines and crossed a little creek onto a big green flat. Thickets of cottonwoods bordered the road and the air was replete with fluffy white puffs. Hemlock, cedar, spruce, and birch



trees dappled the ground which looked so soft and warm the sleeper imagined curling up on it like a housecat. He remembered his aunt's tabby, who always slept through the afternoon atop a wrecked old upright piano she kept on her front porch in Atlanta. He at once felt he'd come a long way and gone nowhere at all. Rounding another corner, the baseball field came into view and the hitchers felt they'd journeyed back in time to a fantasy land. Old trucks were scattered all around, many of them looking custom made. Beautiful blonde wooden bleachers contained the infield. A game was in progress. The pitcher tossed the rosin bag and eyed a runner on second.

"Park anywhere," Lazy-eye said.

"Roger that."

They got out and Long-hair and Lazy-eye disappeared among friends. The hitchers realized they were the only white people there. People watched them, but always with a friendly countenance. Chistochina was historically an Ahtna fishing village and an outpost for traders and trappers. There was some gold found in the surrounding rivers and streams, but the region was never overrun by miners. The local Cheesh Na' people call Mt. Sanford Kelt'aeni. A grip of kids played tag, weaving in and out of the trees, beneath the bleachers. Their shouts melded with the cracks and hollers of the ball game, the dull thump of the catcher's mitt, the stout pronouncements of the umpire.

Then the hitchhikers experienced a blinding flash of the obvious. They were very far away, had become true strangers, and yet in the same moment they identified a sameness, a unity. Babbling brook, whispering pines, baseball, tag. The air filled with floating

cotton. It the stands the crowd chewed tobacco, couples sat close, old folks felt the sun on their face and closed their eyes. They'd seen it all before. The hitchers wandered around and came upon Long-hair, shoulder deep in the hood of a pickup, grease smeared on his cheek. He winked at them. Just as they approached to observe the work being done, three honks turned their attention back to the Lynx. There was Lazy-eye at the wheel, yelling for all of them to get in with a note of frenzy in his voice. As they piled in a woman came bounding up to the car. Lazy-eye put it in reverse, backed up, turned the wheel, put it in drive, but she was standing in front of the bumper, her hands on her hips. Long-hair said something in Athapaskan and laughed until a look from Lazy-eye quieted him. The woman's stare bore into the driver. Slowly, deliberately, he lay on the horn.

"I ain't getting mixed up with no more Northway boys," she shouted, and vanished into the crowd, which ignored the game, finding the quarrel more intriguing. Lazy-eye eased back toward the main road without a word.

"You don't need a woman, or any money, or anything really, if you got the love of the land." Lazy-eye sped to forty as they hit the highway once more.

"How can the land love you?" the sleeper asked.

"You gotta court it. You gotta love it back."

"Then what?"

"Then it lets you in on its secrets, gives you something can't never be taken away."

"Not all its secrets," Long-hair qualified, "only some of them." A black Range Rover with shiny chrome spinners sped alongside the Lynx. A woman was driving. She said something to Long-hair, something

lost in the wind between the vehicles. He laughed anyway.

“We’re goin to Tok Lodge,” she yelled. Long-hair replied with raised eyebrows and the SUV sped ahead and disappeared. Long-hair brought in a country station on the radio. Something old. Doc Watson. Followed by something new. “Redneck Yacht Club.”

“You know *Dances with Wolves*?” Lazy-eye asked.

“The movie?” Dog-face replied.

“Yeah.”

“You like that movie?”

“Yeah.”

“What about it?”

“Tatonka.”

“What?”

“Tatonka,” Long-hair said. “Their word for buffalo right?”

“Oh. Yeah.” There was an odd silence, everyone thinking.

“Are you mad at white people?” the sleeper asked.

“What for?” Long-hair responded.

“For fuckin everything up, not loving the land, I dunno.”

“I ain’t mad at nobody.”

“You got any papers?” Lazy-eye asked.

“I’ll buy you some in Tok,” Dog-face said.

“Ah fuck the papers.”

“Yeah,” Long-hair said. “Fuck the papers.”

The Range Rover was parked at Tok Lodge. The hitchhikers went into the gas station and bought Zig Zags and coffee. They sat in the town park and Lazy-eye rolled a joint. A pair of burly mountain men types walked up, one fat, one bald.

“You guys headed for Yukon?” the fat one asked.

“We are,” Dog-face said. “Hitchin.”

“Us too. Thing is, woman picked up a hitcher down Northway Junction couple days ago, he attacked her, she fled into the woods, he stole her car.”

“Fuck. Did they catch him?”

“Yeah. Someone saw the rig in Dawson. Then they got him at Manly. But the point is, nobody is pickin’ up hitchers now.”

“Shit.”

“And,” the bald one said, “black bear are everywhere, that’s why I got this.” He pulled a two foot long machete from a scabbard at his side. The hitchers’ eyes went wide, the Northway boys looked unimpressed. A pair of women pushing a stroller and smoking Marlboro 100’s walked up and started talking to Lazy-eye. Baldy and fatty walked away with a good luck solidarity fist in the air. The six remaining shared the joint.

“Come see my new rig,” Lazy-eye said to the women. “So long boys.”

“So long,” said the sleeper.

“See ya in the funny papers,” said Dog-face.

“Fuck the papers,” said Lazy-eye, stretching his arms above his head, reaching for the sky.

They spent the night in Tok. Sometimes an RV would pass, but they never stopped. It never got dark. The gas station never closed. The next day a troika of Chilkoot Tlingit guys picked them up. They said none of them could speak more than a few words of the old language. They rode in an open-top horse trailer so only the sky and tree branches were visible. It rained. They passed fatty and baldy, who were singing and playing guitars on the roadside. Dog-face read some Ecclesiastes, and thought how he always enjoyed the wisdom books more than the histories or the prophets. They passed the turn off to Northway. They

entered Canada, surprised that the border patrol wasn't more suspicious of them. They sped along the shores of Destruction Bay and Kloo Lake, the wind cleaning their faces. The ride turned south towards White Pass, leaving them at Haines Junction. Only 150 kilometers to Whitehorse. 2000 to Edmonton. 3500 to Winnipeg. 5500 to Toronto. Swiftly moving clouds, flat and black bottomed, with billowy white tops, cast shadows on the rolling hills of big timber before them. The road was coarsely paved, the yellow line fading.

"We should make a sign," Dog-face said.

"You have to know where yer going to make a sign," the sleeper said.

"We could write home."

The temperature dropped dramatically as a cloud shadow fell over them, and then rose just as swiftly as the midday sun returned.

"Do you think we have the love of the land?" Dog-face asked.

"Yeah man, we ain't not scapegraces. Look at us. How else could we live this way?"

There was a crackling in the woods across the highway and a small black bear lumbered out onto the shoulder. They were silent and it pawed the gravel and then, seeing them, stood on its hind legs, its nose aquiver in intense sniffing, its ears erect in intense listening. After a moment it dropped back to all fours and retreated into the trees.

# Your Siren's Running on Empty

---

by Abigail Grindle

Last night an ambulance wailed outside my window. I ran to his side, wrapped my arms around his hood, squeezed him close. I told him he was safe. I said words I could not prove, words that could build a house but not a home. I clasped his rearview mirror between my fingers and led him through my front door, removing his tires, setting him on the floor. His bumper was too big for the futon.

The lady in the ambulance's belly cried through his walls. She yelled, MY HEART IS BROKEN, and I said, MAYBE YOU SHOULDN'T HAVE CUT YOUR HAIR. I pried open his jaws, birthed the woman onto solid ground, head first, screaming. In the process, her arms ripped from their sockets but I don't think she noticed. With purple nail polish I painted a dotted line down her chest. Instead of marching ants, they were fairy footprints because she was afraid of insects. I cracked her ribs along the guide. I unclogged her arteries with a plunger. I sewed her ripped valves with shoelaces and whiskers. I knelt on the floor, hands dripping blood, her organs exposed to air like a lizard belly-up to the sun. THERE'S NO WARMTH HERE, I told her. It was shut off months ago.

The ambulance watched, wails growing louder and louder. I smacked his taillights with my bloody

hand to shut him up. I smacked him so hard the plasma separated from each blood cell, staining his skin with sticky blotches, more yellow than red. YOU DON'T KNOW, he said. YOU CAN'T FEEL THIS, he said. YOU CAN FIX THINGS, he said. I made him go wash his windshield in the bathroom, dim his flashing lights. YOU'RE CAUSING A SCENE, I said. CLOSE YOUR MOUTH, I said. PRETEND I'M YOUR MOTHER, I said.

Last night, you wailed outside my window. I ran to your side, wrapped my arms around your neck, squeezed you close. I told you that you were safe. Your heart was rattling in your bones, its motor stuttering, idling. I begged you to turn the key and step out of the broken vehicle your body created; I begged you to see the grace that lined my open palms. I said words I could not prove, words that could build a house but not a home. Words that could cover, but could not fix.

# Landscape with Young Gourmand

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by Ben Miller

## *The Mandarin*

For my twelfth birthday (12 going on 42) I demanded a “sit down” dinner at the Mandarin restaurant in Moline, Illinois. The Mandarin for many mistaken reasons: pagoda façade and emerald interior glow, Samurai sword décor and piranha aquarium, dragon wallpaper and Buddha shrines. I first heard tell of the place during Grandfather Miller’s annual holiday Festival of Sights and White Chocolate Pretzels at Steepmeadow condominium complex, the glass tuber of *development* overlooking (overseeing?) riverside slums. Uncle Frank, walleyed doctor, the Burn Unit czar and harness racing aficionado, bragged of *going to the Maundering in Mooooliiiine with Geeeeeeeri*, hip-swinging chain-smoking nurse and all around evil Aunt. Now, normally I would not want to be seen at any spot favored by my father’s relatives—snobs who mocked our flailing support of socialized medicine and the Equal Rights Amendment, tuning out passionate poor relative ripostes and witless misquotations of Oscar Wilde, Bertrand Russell, Hart Crane, Upton Sinclair, Charlie the Tuna, Gilbert, Sullivan and Lillian Hellman. AND YET: extensive newspaper/Yellow Pages research on my part indicated the Mandarin experience was The One for a



fantail shrimp idolizer and overly receptive attender of Lincoln Park *Mikado* productions starring 30 or more paper kimonos. Damn if I'd let the snickering devil children of William F. Buckley Jr. deny *me* a trip to the crass Illinois orient! The swiftest route to the Mandarin from our feral think-tank in Davenport, Iowa, involved the towering I-74 bridge—aggressively artless, bureaucratically lurid lumination of threadbare metallurgy. (Like a typical perpetual escapist, I became emotionally entangled with bridges. They were second in my cosmology only to Doors to Heaven. Bridges were main players in feverish family library runs and thrift store hops and relative visits across the unchummy chop of the Mississippi River. They got you to the next Steepmeadow insult or Goodwill rack “find” or pretended to intend to do so. That they were weaker than the great river was always evident. The river stretched like an endless sentence the hapless parenthesis of the bridge floated above. Bridges, no matter how familiar, came out of nowhere, always. Whistled in many languages. Mid-air weather corrals rocking in high wind; slick piers in rain. The high or less high launching pads for the post-partum depressed. Sometimes their bereft gray Gretel toll baskets did request, and obtain, our nickels. Bridges cheered hard for us to reach the other side or hissed, rooting against our scrofulous tenure on Planet Midwest.) “DAD! RESERVATIONS ARE AT SIX AND IT’S A QUARTER TILL!” and we were still at home. Would the babysitter show? Trouble dressing—all three of us. The right clothes kept changing into the wrong clothes. Little hands grabbing our ankles, pleading: “DON’T GO!” Did they have a point? We feared what the meal would cost and the bridge to be crossed. Under wheel, the I-74

Bridge thundered threats. It fed the eyes many ways to die—low railing, no shoulder, denuded emergency call boxes, constant semi-truck traffic and toxic monoxide back-draft. Such a bridge could give a child cancer. Merrier were those creepily photogenic covered bridges with a clap-trap ambiance of spacious coffins for horses, bonnets. The I-74 Bridge was the big challenged baby of local spans. It lacked the bleak historical gravitas of the iron Government Bridge and lyrical smog-strung arches of the Centennial Bridge. 1960s budgetary blasphemy had birthed the I-74 Bridge. It was cost-cutting on a grand scale but even so, I was sure someone had gone hungry to fund its construction. Had bones been stirred into pilings? The gigantic span for all its spanning appeared haunted by a lack of substance, a bare minimum of what a million rivets and tons of concrete could amount to. The night of the Mandarin outing spotlights spidered over drooping cables bearing a disheartening resemblance to an astral girdle come undone. A bridge apparently committed to disconnecting shores! Then again—look at those sore shores. Were they connectable? The clueless bricks, rusty fences, sagging roofs—they belonged where, and to what, and to whom? From the wind-scoured deck of any Mississippi River bridge you beheld to the East and to the West, no so much East and no more West—as if America had here drained out of America, into a storm grate—long-to-haunt-me cities of shaky solidity, rasping and ungraspable. The lightning teeth of Time had done quite a job, sawing sawing away at a defeat already complete, like a madman in a workshop disassembling out-moded chairs and tables and china cabinets, creating of objects the objectlessness. Doubt evident in every urban

angle (they all looked incidental now), contentious silence block after block, pangs of the empty park benches and desolate bank plazas and cobbled litter-strewn pedestrian malls, the confounding convoluted civic clench of floundering downtowns below unelevating elevations host to the aggrieved platoons of homeowners counting on their border gardens of petunias to protect them from evil. It was so laughable as to be serious, this ephemeral metro area that could not be named and so had many names—Tri Cities and Quad Cities (if Bettendorf was counted) and Quint Cities (if East Moline was added to the tab) and “Illowa”—a tragic Chamber of Commerce attempt to improve on the off-color echo of “bi-state region.” In this region you were continually looking for The Region—and if you were stupidly imaginative or a serial compromiser (and I happened to be both) you settled for Theme. Bee Gees or Mexican or Chinese: The Mandarin. Baby-sitter instructed and hands pried off ankles and false promises made about return time—we were free to go—and did go, demons in tow. Off we flew down River Drive, nothing to the right, nothing to the left, nothing behind and nothing ahead (not yet), junker’s pillowy tires spiraling up I-74 on-ramp, *bounce-sway-rattle-bang-vrooooooming* too close to the too low guardrail, father’s butch at the wheel, mother’s helmet hair dented by wind bypassing shut windows, entering via hood cracks, door cracks, roof cracks, scathing hiss of a Bronte moor, the mind-crumbing but in no way dumb howl, sensate if indecipherable echo of ultimate knowledge which did not fit in any skull or car. How could we live so dumb while over our heads in truth? We could barely hear ourselves yell on the I-74 Bridge. As usual I was better greased than the car, creases high and

low lathered in trip-tension run-off. I picked shirt off my tits, wiggled in vain to re-align askew underwear. (Off-kilter underwear was akin to molting like a rattler.) I considered clothes almost as disturbing and deadly as flesh. In car wind my thick bangs raged like a brain blanket getting the crumbs beaten out of it with wooden spoons. I felt highly filtered—distilled to fine foul swamp water—everything blown out of me, the useless sludge left. I was being eaten by the teeth of the wind-currents like a plump salty prawn! I smiled. It was some introduction to maturity. It would make the newspapers, wouldn't it? For all the placeless place muck I had slogged through and nameless name dread I walked with on my many wanderings down strange empty streets which seemed to anoint me oldest child and only heir of Dystoopa I later discovered was pronounced Dystopia—for all the adult-grade isolation, there remained—still!—a pinafore shred of a child very determined to turn twelve, scrap culinary charm off asphalt. Food was politics I had ascertained. I had chowed my way to this epiphany. Cans and boxes tossed taste buds in prison for no reason other than your economic status. I had to blast my way out with extravagant Birthday Dinner requests. If that did not work I might even have to fast. Almost impossible for a blubber-butt to conceive of, but with morbid interest I followed accounts of hunger strikers everywhere. I knew food—or lack thereof—was an escape as sure as any Door to Heaven. I knew what I had in The Mandarin. Unlimited access to soy sauce, and in the briny beany savor of soy sauce lurked a continent where I could own an ox, and sing to it. But lacking Heaven's Door to knock on I must think that. Sweet and sour Jesus I was gung-ho to reach The Mandarin

of Frank and Geri! And there hector their favorite waiter, and spin the contraption my mother had been wailing about for days—THE LAZY SUSAN—and inhale the good Green Lantern light and request tea and find out what an egg roll really was (the frozen kind being crust around a puff of beef-flavored humidity) and taste chow mien that did not slurp out of a can like graveyard goop, packed with maggot white bean sprouts and bamboo shoots akin to rubber tongue depressors. But would we get there? Survive Nostradamus I-74 lanes? The highest bridge. Stacked cruise ships could pass underneath a structure that need only provide clearance for tire-slung tugboats, coal-heaped barges and dredges raking the silt, searching for drowning victims. I-74 Bridge shook the most too. Whenever you were headed, it stole the show. Over a half mile long, busy 24 hours a day, and yet there existed not one D.O.T. caretaker, day-glove vest and stubble and pipe snug in a booth equipped with a walkie-talkie. Break-down and you'd be wise to leave a will on the dashboard before trying to change the tire or tend the ruptured radiator hose. Gusts belted the chassis, pushing us toward guard rail oblivion, center-line semi-truck apocalypse. But I was calm, suddenly. This was what I had asked for, wasn't it? It was what I wanted too. Somehow it was. I had the time for all feelings: seconds passed like millennia. I was calm because I had been here many times before; knew I would be back—or thought I knew it. Sad soft sons and sad smoky fathers and sad poetry-quoting mothers were not as easy to kill as they looked. (Before I fled the area and its ghosts in my late teens, during a manic "fitness" phase, I would BIKE OVER this bridge—handlebars jumping bronco-style in the gale—and JOG over it

once also on the tight rope of the pedestrian walkway, not wanting to die but rather to enter more deeply into the bridge mysteries—commune with them, and yes, I did, coasting intimately along on an ultimate city edge.) River could not be seen but it was felt in the relentless deafening blasts of air—deadly tug and swirl of currents, leviathan humps of scrub islands, mud heavy like wool and sleeving levees. Hillside lights flickered in the distance without disrupting Stygian murkiness in which they were arrayed like a hot coal buffet. Red winks, orange winks, Illinois relative hell: Dr. Miller's crystal palace of prejudices and dry roasted peanuts and the Verna he married after Rose died and an expensive uncooperative poodle failed to address his need for a compliant companion—Grandpa Stanley's small brick castle of booze, fireplace poker, Nixon worship and the cell at the end of the hall containing the four-poster bed and Granny, stroke victim who had regained her Crittenden County Kentucky drawl, and some mobility, but dare not venture into the hallway without protection, subsisting each night on a little wooden salad bowl of peppermints, and whimpered prayers. Other brighter (but no less freaky) torch-like lights of parking lots and strip malls and gas stations that appeared to be moving up or down the hill as if marching to different locations where business might be a little bit better—as if there could ever be a new start in a place where history happened everywhere equally, whether it seemed that way or not. I thought of restaurants that had not even made the list of thirty I had cut to twenty then ten then five then two, where the decision process stalled as I waited for a Sign From Above as to whether this was truly the year to pick The Captain's Table, a perennial finalist and bridesmaid. Fast

food restaurants of course received no consideration, and nor did the beastly Bring 'Er Inn with its cave façade and sign depicting a caveman dragging his mate by the hair. I wished I was bald—no hair for the wind to whip me with. Father screamed at mother and she screamed back, sound pouring into sound and fading deafeningly. Truck ahead, truck behind and always a truck passing on the left, always the longest fall of your life on the right, and mid-bridge a fleeting exhilarating feeling of participating in the Big Bang, riding an earthly shard into obsidian firmament where raw matter had the leeway to expand and expand and expand into a glittering new galaxy with a life span just short of eternal... “Rail, Dave!” “I see it! Shaddup, will ya? Let me drive!” As if it mattered a whit who was at the wheel! As if there was a wheel—could be a wheel—on a family situation like ours! “TANKER, DAVE!” “I see it!” “You TOUCHED the rail!” “What’s it there for?” Family of hurtling smithereens with nowhere to land but back home after each careen, as nowhere but our own strange home could contain our dire contradictions. Family of one toothbrush gnawed to a nub and many starving cats and sheets but no blankets or blankets but no sheets and stained pillow ticking and too many advanced degrees sitting around unused—his law degree, and her own law degree, his college degree, and her college degree. Family of father by himself in the recliner. Family of mother and me tossing the tennis ball back and forth in the street at midnight, she threatening: *Let’s run away, Benny. Leave the others! I’ll take the Illinois bar.* Family of me and my Marvel comic books. Family of me and Elizabeth, second oldest, also a budding poet of gothic darkness—Edward Gorey our agreed upon model, Chas

Addams a close second. Family of middle children partiers—Howie and Mitzi. Family of stoic thumbsuckers Nanette and Nathan. None of it could be! It just WAS. A domestic cell diseased, dividing to live, dividing to die, spreading poisons. Ask the quaking babysitter back there at 15 Crestwood Terrace, head in hands or oven, cooked, another sacrifice to the Godless roil of fur, diapers, cans, boxes, bags, mags, butts, nubs, crusts—new wreckage tangling with ancient, an ever-evolving gnarl of unfulfilled needs, right dreams turned wrong, terrible choices, weird role reversals! What were mother’s instructions to the babysitter? Something along the lines of: *Put yourself to bed at nine, it’s easier that way*. And how did Sacrifice respond? “But I don’t understand, Mrs. Miller...” Good point! How to get straight a story that was anything but straight? Our dank inept momentum was lateral, none of us ever really moving forward, only out out out out thus further in in in in into an abyss of our own making, with its glaze of river mud and smokestack haze. A family unit—if no unit—was the most powerful engine of disunity—destroyer of imposing social structures assembled carefully, over many generations! Behind I-74 wind howled our own stronger and longer wind. Two hundred pounds I weighed—as if eating could keep me anchored, make me hold. It had not—had not at all. Like the world’s most portly lint I clung to the mother clinging to nothing and we had few moments of peace, hearts stumbling and minds lurching in a futile effort to align identities with a perilous situation on the ground neither of us could completely perceive, being always in flight, cataloging blurs. Ridiculous people! who wanted, secretly, to get real. I knew that about her—if she did not know that about me. But there was



no reset button on the madness. It had its own momentum now, and even our bravest attempts to make the disaster make sense resulted only in more absurdity. We snatched at THEMES—Copland or Cuban or Chinese—and in them attempted to package our thickest simple human desires. We were all riding shot-gun on a calamity clearly of no bother to anyone else, yet to me, at least, of such concern that I would be willing to spend the next thirty-five years trying to figure out the missing how, and why, and who, and what, and where. (Let go? Go on? The advice, though delivered out of genuine concern, can be harmful, engendering the illusion that the past is some unsightly clod of crap on life's path to step around or "overcome." It's a sickening mess, all right. But a mess of paramount complexity, and importance to identity. No, the past cannot ever be changed, what is done is done, but the vast and imperial drag of childhood on a personality is impossible to wish away. It catches up, always. It informs, always. To "let go" of the dialogue with personal history because the history is difficult or murky is to free the hands for all sorts of misguided mischief that comes of glad ignorance—or failure to respect—one's own elaborate wiring.) Back then, though, there was no figuring out anything. There was the fight. We were fighting—each on our own way—the same battle each day and each night and reaping the same results which only seemed different because duct tape was not always in the same place on the discount bag of nuts, and the time of arrival at the old conclusions varied. There was no law of the land. There was barely land, and the law had been sent to a rest home or died. Without law, attorneys are not much use. If I was caught in the middle of a dissolved marriage, they were caught in

the middle of lives that seemed to have no start, and no end. The eyes of my parents asked one thing in unison: *What is natural about me?* “SPARKS! BUMPER HIT THE RAIL! SPARKS! WE’RE GOING OVER!” She could see it. I too—our imaginations had something sick in common. Corroded car-feather wafting into chasm, skeleton fingers dialing the Ma Bell chasm phone to cancel dinner for three at The Mandarin. “RAILINGS ARE MADE TO BE HIT, BUMPERS BUMPED! CLAM DOWN! I GOT THE HANG OF THIS BRIDGE!” And off that sticky wheel hung but two limp fingers! RAIL ANGST did not subside until we were funneled over train yards and warehouses, rumble-clunking down a ramp jammed like a stent into the dust-clogged heart of Moline. Stoplight! *Screeeeeeeeeeech*. Tailpipe fumed under the I-74 interchange, a tangled sluggardly matrix as gloomy as those crepe webs mother spun across the cracked living room ceilings each birthday, tape marks remaining for years, turning mustard yellow. (At home the fresh web awaited—green and blue, my favorite colors.) Rush hour up there, no car but ours below, Stonehenge pillar shadows, the stillness. Illinois Orient? “Drive!” I pleaded with the pilot. Time would keep spooling backward until we went forward—back to the Ice Age, back to the Big Bang. Match flared, Camel embered, inhale, exhale. “The light is red, Benny.” Having let so much else slide away—career, family, health—it was vital to idle at deserted intersections to show me (and suspicious spouse) that he remained careful, introspective, an ample serving of moral fiber. I pitied him—I did—“IT’S GREEN! GO!” *Vrooooooooooom*. The Hotel LeClaire existed in downtown Moline (a favorite spot of Dr. Miller and Wife #3), but I did not see a maroon

awning with the elegant Twain-era lettering. Perhaps the lobby (and restaurant salad spinners) had retracted into the earth so no tourist made the mistake of sightseeing following cherry flambé. At night hints of civilization departed from unrented blocks of real estate in the Mississippi River Valley. Neglect ruled. It was all because of the death of such-and-such department store, claimed the female minister in the sticky pulpit of the front seat, and she bowed her head and said a prayer for Parker's, and Grant's too, and I bowed my head, mourning all that department stores were—chiefly, to us, a kinder place to get lost than K-Mart. So many interesting nooks! And working step-stool water fountains (water so cold it tasted like magnesium ice cream) and plush lounges instead of restrooms... palaces of merchandising open late into the night, except on Sunday. Without a department store a downtown could not hold itself together after the P. O. closed. See! Gutters sprouted vines, graffiti curled across walls: incubus language—incubus rage, pointillism of the alley glass glitters, umbrellas of street light glow isolating the sparse parade of parking meters, phone booths, mailboxes... Then—just ahead!—green-lit red pagoda pillars! Genuine mirage. Corporeal hallucination. Spice trader outpost afloat in a hole lightening teeth of time had sawed sawed sawed. Inside steam genies rose from tea pots, a just few tablespoons of golden oil kept the kitchen temple lit. “THERE IT IS! THE MANDARIN!” Green glow closing in on us, it seemed, rather than us closing in on it. My next base station from which to launch a short-lived but viable war against isolation. I'd ask for extra Fortune Cookies to bring home and open on rainy days! We parked in front, hot tongue of the hood not liking it: *ping-tick-knock, ping-tick-knock*. Usual

anxious parental stalling tactics: he lit another cigarette, she combed spit into her hair, he yawned, she moaned. Dandruff brushed off shoulders, poetry anthology consulted, one front door sticking then the other, Moby Purse puking onto curb the rich detritus generated by the daily explosion of possibilities—tissues, coins, expired library cards, toothpicks, coupons. I tried to help my mother in every way I could, but drew the line at purse management. She stopped, gathering articles, then straightened and looked around for prostitutes. Father limped around to the sidewalk. Like me, he aged in decades. A decade a year. (Methusela, move over.) Fingers pointed at the depth to which Moline had sunk. Deceased dime store noted, shuttered saloon, broken windows, too-close-for-comfort pariah dog yowl, *Cannery Row* phantoms crowding loading docks, and a lot where trucks went to die like old white elephants: **KEN'S HEATING OIL SERVICE, P.M. CATERING BY PAM.** We had come so far... but the carved door, just across the sidewalk, never seemed more unreachable. My father paused to pat a pocket, pockets. Mother, a stunned expression on her face, yanked purse straps like a paratrooper discovering the ripcord is a dud. This was typical. (When at sixteen I read the classic time-stretching drama *The Iceman Cometh* I considered inmates of Harry Hope's rooming house—Larry and Ed and Pat and Willie and Rocky—to be close relatives of ours—they suspended forever in the tick-tock 1912 gloom—while we were locked in our skulls dusted with misbegotten dreams and coasting by halting—stopping, starting, stopping—through the gritty nadir of our American era.) With my own squealing potent mixture of despair and faith, I urged reluctant (indigent?) dining com-

panions onward. We were “all in this together.” We had to be—didn’t we? Two more years went by in a minute... then a watchful waiter in a red vest opened the hollow dragon door. We lugged emotional baggage further. He jumped out of the way to avoid giggling grunting yapping Entrance Hysteria. Green Lantern Green Hornet glow gushed like a wild runny mysterious sauce over cow brown stool legs grazing at the short bar, over a myriad of tiny brass upholstery tacks—lime light, Go light, nuclear scare. This was our treat. The reward we had earned. It must be loved because we had gotten here the hard way. No doubt about that. The I-74 Bridge was the capper on a brutal journey that had begun, according to my calendar, 365 days prior: the day after my last birthday dinner on November 5. Since then I had chewed my way through a year’s worth of mangy gray peanut-butter-and-cracker mouth mud, and cottage-cheese-Miracle-Whip muck, to at last! be basted in the sweet otherworldly light sauce of green grass and moss trickling down (and also up) clicking beaded curtains. Dimness bathed and cleansed my senses. We had entered a spectral grotto of absolution—a cabiny culinary retreat perfectly suited to serve the unbalanced, undone, unholy. Ghosts of garlic. Hints of E.S.P. and reincarnation and Tarot. I smelled Uncle Frank’s peppery Christian Dior cologne in the foyer. He was not inside. Hangers were inside—the coatless coat rack poised beside the cash register like a complex musical instrument waiting to be struck with collars. Early November, but uncommonly warm, I realized belatedly. Odd how appreciation of, or upset with, the weather, was most intense indoors. I took ten steps with my eyes. Wilted tree next to a parakeet cage next to the jade fat man! Oh, I could see why tacky Frank

and Geri loved The Mandarin. It seemed as if Charlton Heston, in silken beanie and pantaloons, might any second sidle from behind a curtain, distribute tablets instead of menus, talking with a Moses-Chinese twang in the stew of green light. Things were off—way off—as only America can make them off. Irish light and Chinese food and the Illinois tax code. Hollywood. It was as if we were haunting a film set where every object consisted of light, and us too. Various small dining areas on slightly different levels: step up to reach horseshoe booths. At one table a solitary man was stuffing his mouth with green-tinted dumplings right out of *Soylent Green*, the smoggy sci-fi classic about a global food shortage, corpses ground into protein wafers. No wonder Heston remained off-stage. The Mandarin was not his meal-ticket. It was our late late show. Gallons of eerie light washed the stains and wrinkles out of our clothing. We were clad in the same goofy starched green jump suit as the rest of the customers—all five. How socialist! I had the bad feeling that told me everything was going to be fine. I was already receiving much of what I had come to get: a scene, an event. The true Birthday Dinner consisted of a Wonderfully Horrid Florid Disorienting Extravaganza, the fancy food but an odd precious afterthought! I loved the tricky idea of gourmet cuisine (luscious entree centerfolds glimpsed in magazines from the library free box) but preferred reliable honest cafeteria fodder like pecan pie and corn fritters and rhubarb pie. And being that rare gourmand who hardly dared to develop his palette, I was relegated to feasting wholly, with nervous gusto, on the Mandarin's flavorful swaggerings of THEME—tantalizing tidbits of non sequitur decor temporarily (and gloriously) displacing destructive

ingrown craziness with the harmlessly insane flamboyance of the Illinois Orient. Skinny tie manager glided forth leprechaun-like. He was worried: we were looking around too much. I squeaked: "Party of three! Miller! We have reservations!" "Lots and lots of reservations." "Where's the aquarium? I called! You said there was a piranha aquarium!" At least I thought about calling. My research was never as involved as I wanted it to be. "But honey!" gurgled mother, sucking ulcerated gums. "Look at those vases!" I did not look. She was playing another joke—it helped soothe the ache in her mouth. The gums and teeth were untreated. She did not trust dentists or doctors, and their billing practices. The cave under the pug nose had a dark existence separate from the rest of the tired but antic face. She washed down the candy she loved with hydrogen peroxide. The cave had seen more nastiness than even her dark eyes, I thought. She saw me not looking away from her at the nothingness of decorations and she did not like that. She did not like to be appraised. She rightly feared it. "Look over there!" Porcelain pork barrels, the "vases" were, next to a dribbling fountain next to a bamboo booby-trap next more jade obesity next to a dragon lady totem pole next to a patch of empty red carpet. Had the Lincoln Park Mikado company unwisely neglected to return a Great Wall screen, or Bay of Shanghai junk, rented from Mr. Skinny Tie? A tough thinking dude, hands on hips—elbows and cheekbones and hair mop. We were boring him as everyone bored him. He inspected the floor. Lunar eclipse eyes, stark unenterable circles. Mother kneaded my shoulder as she kneaded my feet at night, making love to the heels, toes, arches, while re-counting details from her favorite books like *Helter Skelter* by

Vincent Bugliosi and other true crime masterpieces. “THE BIRTHDAY BOY!” The manager’s mango Adam’s apple glided greenly above the olive tie knot: “My breast congratulation.” Tone ungenerous, clipped. At The Mandarin I would not get a special dessert on my special day, but fortune cookies were better—sealed in plastic and less likely to be stale, thinly frosted. “Come writh me.” We went writh him. Our darting eyes and lumbering steps and ill-fitting clothing and tons of grief following the tailored Hong Kong suit into the spooky Chow Mein chamber. He walked. We lollygagged in our noir slapstick fashion, lubricated by surrounding illusions, fending off paranoia. Mother, like a scared child, grabbed my hand. *Was the reservation podium equipped with buttons controlling trap doors under throne chairs?* “Writh way,” the manager chanted. “The toidy! Where is it?” Her “ninny” voice—she going on the offensive as she always did when on foreign terrain. Mouth eight times the size of her bladder! Scissored fingers jabbed in the direction of a curtain beside the seaside village mural. “Don’t need to tinkle! Just getting my bearings!” Manager glared at Husband wearing grief and scuffed shoes. Husband shrugged. He dragged the bad leg, broken when he was a boy, and set wrong by Dr. Miller. The severity of the limp varied from hour to hour. It was worse —like now—when he attached the pain to history: **my father maimed me**. Quack incompetence? Godly malice? No one knew. No one dared demand answers of The Doctor who vacationed in London and wore French smoking jackets. Wife backtracked to keep pace with arthritic Husband. She was much shorter: her shoulders crested at his mushy chest. For a few slow motion moments they were a definite pair, bumping empty tables. And I was a boy



again, not her pawn to deploy as protection or a sponge to absorb her excess anger and loneliness, but simply a son, no more, no less. I felt blessed. Already the dinner had worked a bit of magic. Going out—roaming far from the house and the other kids—was a gamble, and if the gamble paid off, it could be fine like this. Gong music. Rugs for various bugs to be snug in. Warrior wall paper, snake-framed mirrors, more porky porcelain barrels depicting dancers and fishermen, their 16th Century stories stored secretly inside. “LAZY SUSAN!” Mother pushed past the manager, bum-rushing a corner table of hemispheric girth. pointing at what looked like a roulette wheel with soy sauce bottles in the middle.. “You put dishes on and spin!” For a fool, she knew scads. “HERE WE CAN SHARE!” No sharing charge, she meant. Maybe it was the cool veil of lantern light, but she looked happier than she had in a long time. Cough, cough, father caught up. Green menus slipped from the owner’s jacket and he headed for the Himalayas while we wedged into throne chairs surreally less roomy than folding chairs, Chairman Mao’s revenge on elitists. Only Moby Purse got comfy, sprawling on the petrified cushion of a fourth chair, drooling Band-Aids, pen cap, receipts. “Three green waters!” cried mother at a young nervous waiter 25 feet away. He did not move. “AND” I petted her so she would not lustily request a green bread basket, forcing the kid to search an alley for rolls left over from an end of Prohibition celebration. “GREEN COFFEE FOR ME!” carped father in his faux-superior office voice. Black tea came; charred taste buds could not differentiate. He liked the coffee. He called me “my boy.” Slithering snake mirror reflections got everything nicely backwards—vanquishing old realities. Chinny

chummy glimmers of latent authority amended each scattershot “my boy!” Glimpses of what might have been if... only if... *Family around a table like allies who worked together, solved problems, learned.* I spun that Lazy Susan hard for good luck. It was more than a roulette wheel. It was a flavor gyre. Gyrating compass in a Northland with no purchase on NORTH. I folded up a cocktail list placemat to take home and study. The drink names were fantastic—Stinger, Grasshopper—and accompanied by aqua cartoons of charismatic glasses. Boxy Chinese letters on the menu cover. Inside, enough English to for us to identity categories of dishes involving chicken, pigs, military titles, emperor egos, mandarin oranges, oyster mushrooms, roast everything. Flipflipflipflipflip mother turned the two page menu into a Dickens novel of deprivation: *Oliver Lo Mein*. She moaned to see tea was not free. In fraught situations she moved faster and father, slower. He froze, neck a pudding pop, lips stuck in the dismissive sphincter position. Dr. Miller’s shadow all over him. Grandpa Stanley’s five o’clock shadow all over her. *Millers always looked like who they were—bland and dismissive; Stanleys wore flesh masks over vaporous identities—owl brows, whiskery cat lips, bilious jowls.* “Benji! Order pork fried rice so I can have some!” I would, I must accommodate her phobia of ordering anything other than more free water or bread, otherwise she would go hungry. But what else? What for me? Choice paralysis. I wanted it all. I might die on the way home, victim of the I-74 vortex. Who knew? And if I could not have it all—I must order perfectly or righteously—I had dragged poor parents here for something good, something divine! But no divine hand guided my menu tracing fingers.

Whatever I ordered, it was certain to be a misguided choice. I would only succeed in wanting what I had not ordered. “General Cow’s... no, the sweet and sour... um—Bird’s... Nest soup! With... Shrimp!” “Beef!” father brilliantly settled on, ahem, snuffle. Merely “Beef.” But the waiter knew exactly what he meant. And we waited in our loud queasy way, and the plates came soon enough, and the Lazy Susan wobbled under the sloppy weight, spinning slowly, a waltzing whirlpool or dolorous casino game—egg rolls, ingots of meat, shrimp tails, velvety sauces sprinkled with green light sauce, and the sum shimmering like a revolving surf-wet sand painting of tribal travails—gruesome and erroneous choices kaleidoscopically mixing and spreading debacle blame around until who ordered what hardly mattered—what mattered was keeping the flimsy disc moving on its secret axis—throbs of spice in the air, tilting rivulets of oil—enough for six for the three of us—theme-drunk, slouching around the big divide of the table.

### *Jumer’s Castle Lodge*

On the long and forking road to Jumer’s Castle Lodge in Bettendorf, Iowa—the suburban enclave barnacled to Davenport’s grime—my father reminded me (for the third time) that the best restaurant in the world was located at Kmart. What meat loaf. “Get the picture, Buster?” I got it. He was not thrilled with the Bavarian-theme birthday dinner spot I had selected after much heart-searching and phone book paging. And more than merely getting his point, I actually knew what he was saying! He was saying he knew I

loved cafeteria food more than any other kind, but when it came to a birthday dinner, I always got it into my fool head to try someplace “new” and “unsuitable” and “pricey.” He was saying I was in my own ludicrous 13-going-on-43-way a foul elitist because I could not imagine blowing out a candle stuck in a serving of macaroni and cheese. He was right too. But wrong also, at least wrong about the quality of Kmart cafeteria food. Genuine cafeteria food must be made by old fashioned cooks with access to a kitchen—and there was no kitchen at Kmart and there were no cooks. There were eighteen-year-old soda machine operators encased in smocks similar to straight jackets and a 180-year-old line matron who had no hair but bravely wore a hair net and was so thin that in comparison a skeleton looked fat. The food was trucked in frozen, the carbo blocks and protein shafts and vegetal orbs of iffy lineage re-heated a microwave and served on Styrofoam for amazingly low prices that attracted a crowd which would be better off chewing straws and saving their change. I hated to think of my father driving five miles from his office to eat alone at the Kmart cafeteria in the middle of a weekday. I had to think of it, however, because he did it. He did it because he was, he thought, “a man of the people.” When you have no friends you think quite broadly. In my imaginary family album—maybe the only record with a chance of surviving our domestic maelstrom of illusions/delusions/visions/ vicissitudes—I had appended a scratch-and-sniff photo of *a portly law office evacuee seated in the fetid fluorescence of a blue-and-red cafeteria space separated from crap-clogged shelves by a frail greasy brown railing, too small chair and too small table, the wide tie and rumped jacket teetering over a pale blue cup*

of tepid fountain cola and liver-colored tray and white tri-well plate. Diarrhea-smooth mashed potatoes. Beans once green and now blue-gray. Meatloaf with the toothy dog breath stink, protein parquet polyurethaned with transparent gravy. He looked around, ready to be recognized by other customers. He was not recognized. No one else was there. Shopping at Kmart was primarily a night act of The People who worked hard during the day to afford luxuries such as nylons and canvas tennis shoes and school supplies. He was alone in the harsh soul-sucking light. Not alone as he could get. If I was seated next to him the aloneness would be perversely compounded—cafeteria isolation plus the isolation of family members who felt farther away from each other the closer they tried to get. But still he was quite alone, lunching in the rear of that cold sprawling store. Drone of loudspeaker announcing *BLUE LIGHT SPECIALS!* in various vacant aisles. With a plastic fork he picked at the gelatinous flooring he had been served... “At Jumer’s there’s suits of armor!” “Go on with ya. Nothing beats Kmart meat loaf.” Romance, he needed. I’d force it down his throat. He’d come around. He was as romantic as me, only too bitter to admit it to himself, 43 going on 86... but he’d see the suit of armor and want to be inside it! Safe from wildly expostulating children, and safe from his kooky wife, and with a job to do: stand and greet Jumer customers... Neon flashes in the speedway night, zillion electric crayons out there, flailing and failing to draw a coherent picture of Quad-Quint-Illowa-Metro-goulash. “At Jumer’s there’s shields!” To fend off collection agencies and enemies of the Equal Rights Amendment, I imagined. “Zoomer’s has pee-can rolls in the bread basket too!” cried mother,

coming to my rescue to sink me. “It’s called *JUMER’S CASTLE LODGE!*” “Aunt Carolee’s boss took her to *ZOOMER’S!*” Mother giggled, mocking me. Then she made amends in the usual fashion, thrusting a hand over the seat. I took it. I held it but I could not touch her, I knew. It was like holding a mascot’s cold rubber hand. I tried not to blame her for the word games. She was the moonlighting mascot for Roget’s Thesaurus. Betsy blamed her. Howard blamed her. And father. It was too easy to blame her. Someone needed to EXPLAIN her. I could not, so struggled to excuse her. She was a law school graduate who never practiced law because actually she was a stymied poet who thought having six children was the next best thing to writing six poems. She had a black cotton ball stuffed in her left leaky ear too. The other had oozed out during the scramble to dress and Oil of Olay herself. She wore the same dress as usual, having taken it off and put it on again: her way of doing laundry. The free hand probed the lap purse, seeking clues as to why she (like her husband) was a poster child for the Past Tense, and she reaped tissues and pennies, she reaped sugar cookie fragments—assaulted cookies far from the safety of the elfy boxes kindly foisted on America by the folks at General Foods. Like me, she crazily counted on *pee-can rolls* to usher in a new era of abundance, understanding. Right? Any logic leap viable as it only need work for a second, then a different thing went wrong to fix with shabby yet sharp thinking that shredded reality like purple cabbage. Before I was teased to death in seventh grade, I should get academic credit for all of my acrobatic fantasies. Developing our brand of idiocy took continual intellectual effort. Wrong must always be right—furiously right—or it was too wrong, too dark. “Haven’t

lived until you've eaten Kmart—"Father would know, having while alive experienced more mortality than a funeral parlor. "That loaf is A-NUMBER-ONE." And you are done, with many decades to go! Life too short! Life too long! A condition to revile lovingly! My heart need not go out to him because his clammy ponderous presence already pressed my chest—male tonnage of disappointment, shame, laziness, odd arrogance bred by failure—the fiber of ineptness filling the back seat as surely as his cigarette smoke—as surely as gravel fill. I was buried under pity for his aching bulk and hating too, hating that I could not hate him more for retiring from the family, putting me in the classic disgusting Greek position of father to younger brothers and sisters, and a mother's replacement husband at school events and free food receptions. "Get left DAVE!" It was peculiarly horrifying to hear her call her husband by the correct name. It fit with nothing else. "LEFT OR YOU'LL MISS THE EXIT!" He got left—dangerously left—farther left than Breshnev!—but the lane split at the right moment and we avoided hitting the pole and the junker plunged then rose, joining zigzagging taillights seemingly engaged in weaving a monumental and redundant incandescent noose around the real estate void. "Tractor trailer!" *HONK!* "Watch out for the x-rated van!" Spray-painted harem-mobile forced our bald tires onto the wide shoulder and I shut my eyes, tasted guard rail on my teeth like braces, but only a dream, only thought I was visiting the dentist for the first time in years, father cranking cranking cranking wheel, junker whipping across three lanes onto the other shoulder, rough passenger seat seas of bad hair cuts, worse attitudes, dashboard books, purse pens lids combs, glove compartment spitting parking tickets,

gusts of snatching candy wrappers and—believe it or not, Ripley—denuding “innie” belly buttons of residual fluff. “TOUR BUS!” “I SEE IT!” “TWO BUSSES!” “THINK I CAN’T COUNT?” “GET OVER DAVE GET OVER OLYMPIC BUSSES ARE” passing in the night like they are not strangers, like they want to wear our crooked bumper like a nightmare tiara, like they want to read what’s scribbled on paper scraps flying out of the bucking lap purse. *WHOOOOSH!* Hurricane lashing antenna and brave antenna fighting back, thrashing, thrashing. “DROPPED MY CIG!” “KEEP AN EYE ON THE ROAD, DAVE!!” What road? We were not on any road. We were riding the high evening tide of soot and smog over Davendorf—cities blending to create less and less from more and more—zones of frantic abject nuclear-family proliferation, screaming kids and couples in yardless hovels, coffee rings of hell on the kitchen table, sticky cable box, grandmother calling to offer to baby-sit, grandmother not trusted to baby sit, no jobs and food stamps or food stamps and jobs so low paying and boring that eyes became bloodshot pinballs endlessly batted around by flippers of frustration/dread; zones of equally sad and transient wealth, vacuumed-looking circular drives of employee-axing factory executives and Defense Department apparatchiks and school superintendent-sorcerers—ranch houses bloated to barn girth and equipped with all appliances save the machine that raised children and the children knew it—they knew they were screwed by inauthentic affluence and reacted: turning primitive, plastering bedrooms with Led Zeppelin zodiac posters and getting stoned before attending the fancy local high school with its carpeted halls, A.C. and darling planetarium. America was the story of individuals and yet what did this



mass of individuals thrust at the windshield? No sense of human endeavor! Rather blundering streaks of negated or erased stories. The nasty and forever breaking bilge of facelessness... what remained after bubbles burst. I had a vision—as I a budding poet must. I had a vision of the Jumer's hostess in Bavarian hosiery waiting for us without knowing she was waiting for us—focused on another problem, the canceled reservation for ten, and smiling because she was one of those unfortunate heroines who when flustered exhibited preternatural calmness until you noticed what a frail shiny hinge her long smile was, the face split as if sword-struck... “Look who's at the Holidome, Benny!” **Dickey Doo and the Donuts.** And what did Dickey do with or to the Donuts? Appear at 7:30 to find out. That sign and a forest of other signs on stalks rising out of parking lots seeded with magic beans by developer Jack. Ramada Inn. Best Western. Big Boy. Country Kitchen. Gulf seashell. Exxon tiger. Target bulls-eye. The corridor of discounts and fast food. McDonald's arches glowing like an x-ray of a cave man skull, nothing inside but M for MEAT. Villa of Chicago-style pizza! Bungalow of fried ice cream; duplex of Belgian waffles! Car port of chili dogs, frosty mugs! A-Frame of All U Can Eat Salad Bar starring a mad scientist's gift to 1976: bacon bits. Crosses of neon to bear, and pulsing plasma of neon—red cell white cell rivers of signage—light streaking as if cities were melting before our eyes, every parking lot and store dripping, sealing residents in wax that never dried, electric commercial morass in which we were increasingly caught but never outright snared. Dearth in all its beguiling treasured varieties—generic and brand name. The blinking forests of DEALS grew into jungle tangles engulfing wallets/purses and

shrieking an urgent story stunningly easy for natives to ignore or shortchange or abandon. Out of each errand what emerged? A lot to reject after one taste and a lot to wish for; the faces gone while still here and the other faces curiously alive, feeding off gone-ness: De John, activist-tormentor of superintendent-sorcerers who cut teacher pay; Uncle Eubie, railing against Federal regulations and riding a bicycle to save the environment and studying Common Law, Latin, computers. In the neon nights everything and everyone mixed quixotically. No helping that. What you could control—if anything—was your response. You had a choice to lay down and give up or to remain seated and choosily oblivious or to stand up. And if you stood, you could stand for something humble but concrete like a new children's health clinic or massive free-floating righteous causes which often quickly drifted into the realm of wanton mischief and mean-spirited static. In this valley hemorrhaging neon, my mother was the carving knife on the loose. She verbally filleted ten-year-old-looking stock clerks until they were prepared to sell their tender souls to give her what she kept on demanding—the sold-out and very much advertised 3 SOCKS FOR 99 CENTS. She haggled over dimes with check-out girls, demanded to see The Manager then castrated **DONNIE G.** with razorous reasoning. *“A dent double the size of a quarter is worth fifty cents off!”* And *DONNIE G.* looked at me as if to ask: *Is this an act?* And with narrowed eyes I tried to warn him this joke was no joke. She was serious in the way mold on bread is serious—fuzzy supernatural blue born of plain white flour. Vaudeville schtick as vital to her existence as oxygen! Don't risk a smirk. She has nothing to lose by nine at night. Each morning she rolls off the couch

and instantly begins throwing *IT ALL* away again—family, career, dignity. By nine she is startlingly free of what she cannot escape. Startlingly liberated for a woman with no salary and just a teaspoon of gas in the tank. She subsists only on suspicion at nine at night. She has completely embraced the concept that she is unworthy of decent strong human attachments and so has no stake whatsoever in sustaining the delicate societal conceits of fairness—the completely lawless attorney-at-law. Those pennies trickling from her purse are not the kind you want to put in your shoe for good luck—they’ll burn through the sole. She is meaning not well. She is at your throat for real. She has been at mine all day and I can tell you her playing does not play. What brings her to Kmart? *THE GRAND AMERICAN STAGE OF KMART!* Should you identify the odor of immeasurable malaise and loss and loneliness you are correct but usually that is accompanied by weakness, not her sort of strength. These charades issue from the gut, the same place as truth, strangely enough. “This torn label is evidence of tampering. Illegal to sell. I get it for *FREE* then!” Deep breath. I was remembering too much of the present. The key to the present was remembering nothing and firmly attaching to a heritage not your own. Deep breath. Deep breath. I needed **C.B.R.**—Culinary Bavarian Resuscitationkraut and potato pancakes and apple sauce and wurst and pee-can rolls—the stucco castle strung with Arthurian banners and spot-lit like the scene of a major architectural accident. “JUMER’S SIGN! GET OFF HERE!” the gluttonous rodent in me roared. Driver got off, jamming on breaks at the bottom of the ramp, re-alphabetizing dashboard library, refreshing windshield hand-print collage. “DAVE I AL-

MOST WENT THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS!” Driver snarled, disdaining her amateur literary allusions. He had tried writing novels long ago. Remains were filed in the basement in leather caskets. The pen clipped to the shirt pocket might have a vague off-putting veneer, a silver unused thing, but it had blazed—or some pen or typewriter blazed—when he was in his twenties, and the failure qualified him for one thing—to be in charge of family literary allusions. We waited for his. They did not come. Honestly, he preferred the tense silence. He flicked a butt into the autumn under the overpass: the Bishop of Vacant Intersections tending yon pylon flock marinating in shadows and soot and idleness. Bulbous shoulders bunched under his ears. Shirt collar creeping up neck bristles, higher, higher. A larger-than-life figure unnaturally seeping from the smallness of his existence: few clients, no friends. “No one coming! GO!” He did not go. He malingered. He gazed thoughtfully (forgivingly?) at rows of glow-in-the dark brethren, bent, bowing, flattened. He *hmmprhed*. That was his sermon. Then he slipped another cigarette out of the pack and disengaged the dash lighter, hot tangerine spiral igniting tobacco—*aaaaahhhh*, male bosom jiggling. “DAVE—BENNY—CAN’T FIND MY READING GLASSES!” Had they fled her mask in fear? Was that a lens glittering on the pavement? “YA NEED A NEW PAIR!” snarled the Bishop. No she didn’t. She needed beloved old ones that her destructive vision had perfectly twisted into optical shrapnel with a shoestring attached. “FOUND EM!” The Hope diamond would not have made her happier. “FOUND EM IN A CUP UNDER MY SEAT! HOW’D THEY—?” Ask some Nobel physicist. “OH!” She grabbed a battered paperback—it but a prop—the flaking entropy scepter

to thrust about as she recited poetry from memory, eyes squeezed shut. “THE WORLD SO FULLA THINGS WE SHOULD ALL BE KINGS!” Her favorite line from *A Child’s Garden of Verse* again mutilated by the tongue’s stomping gray heel, maybe deservedly. Robert Louis Stevenson could be annoying after age eight. “OH—!” She misquoted more poetry I ignored out of love for poetry and her. Blue smoke points crowned the butch of the phlegm-gargling Bishop. And on and on. Then we were in Bavaria’s parking lot! Flung-open gates (attached to no walls, hovering magically in front of the Ford bumper), pinacles and ramparts seeded with strings of flying saucer lights, arches of a castle too young to harbor a vampire or cast a frightful shadow. Perfect. The cartoon I sought—pure romance, no trouble ever. (I thought then: but at seventeen going on forty-seven I would be taken by a dentist’s window to the new Jumer’s Castle Lodge in Davenport—a date, though I did not realize it until too late—in the Holy Grail lounge Mrs. Goldman talked of her dead husband, the dentist, and offered me some of his fine hardly worn jackets, then mentioned her recent mastectomy and insisted we slow dance...) “JUMER’S!” I genuflected in the sodden back seat. “JUMER’S CASTLE LODGE!” You were not only what you ate, but also where you ate! Father, water-injected Kmart loaf of fragility. Mother, gust of bacterial vapor from the iffiest cafeteria—Shannon’s. And I, chivalric Jumer parapets—the perfect prefab fantasia for a boy born November 5, 1963, last of the Camelot babies, weeks later rocked to the tune of J.F.K.’s funeral dirges (or so I was told, and so I believed—she would despairingly revel in sticking an infant’s face in a stately coffin.) Parents pointed out parking spots too small or

near hydrants or just not there. “THERE’S A SPACE!” “EMPLOYEES ONLY!” “I SEE ONE!” “AIRPORT VAN!” “THAT ONE’S FREE!” “TOO SMALL!” “TRY IT, DAVE!” Forward, backward, forward, backward, forward, backward, forward, forward, backward, backward, backward, forward, car seats pitching, cowlicks in new upright positions, litter roiled, what felt like seaweed around my ankles, one black sock, one blue. “TOLD YA! TOO SMALL!” “OVER THERE!” “BIKE RACK!” And on and on and on. Torches flanked ENTRANCE where a valet stood tall, ponytail cobra-ed under martial cap, pensive, thinking? *Worthless is a flower power revolution that does not endure... worthless is a flower...* Did father throw Col. Hippie the keys? Somehow we solved the problem of Bavaria’s parking lot. We materialized in the lobby of Inquisition blood-red carpeting and timeline flotsam/jetsam: framed family crests, coats of arms, hatched helmetry (mother’s bangs fit right in), breastplates, drop-lighting and push-button phones, the latest thing in Bavarian knight world. But forget about flesh-colored desk phones and wall phones. Jumer’s was ALL ABOUT ARMOR a tit-turreted boy needed to survive teasing... just as The Gourmet House in Rock Island was ALL ABOUT THE PIANIST softly playing “Blue Skies” to calm stormy souls and The Mandarin was ALL ABOUT THE LAZY SUSAN, sharing my heartburn with parents who caused it. I flicked a suit of armor. It pinged in a totally fraudulent but absolutely evocative fashion! For a devious reason mother chose that moment to repeat what Lillian Hellman told the McCarthy Committee of witch hunters: “I WILL NOT tailor my beliefs to fit this year’s fashion show!” I pinged the armor again. How wonderful to celebrate a birthday

centuries removed from Sudlow Junior high: shower room towel snappers, playground knives, lunch table of fellow losers—Ronnie already thinking about dropping out, man—and fucking locker padlock I could not master in the five minutes between classes, buzzer-sounding and Gesling, Hall Commandant, rushing over, clipboard in assault position. “Reservations?” Stiletto-browed hostess looked us up and down as if we were a pack of assorted wily dirty towels trying to reenter through the front minutes after being carted out the back. We were on that lobby like a stain with six legs. “RESERVATION FOR THREE!” I squeak-roared. “MILLER!” Hostess brow stabbed Hostess forehead half to death. Lipstick frowned, smiled a slender stressed enamel hinge. “All rightee!” in a tone of polite scorn and she led us into a medieval dining area to die for—die by sword, by lance, by mace—die of laughing at mantle tankards and moose chandeliers. Gas hearth flared. Unicorn bladders, if they were not water pitchers. Businessmen on the expense account rampage. Housewives thanking their mucky stars, no dishes tonight! I spotted Sir. Walter Scott the 16th—goatee, mint toothpick. “Place is hopping tonight!” I tried not to wonder why I saw no German food. I saw apoplexy being served six ways at a table. I saw the ordinary entrees from sea, sky, laboratory. A bread basket robber after our own hearts: more food in doggie bag than ordered! Full frontal disgust of Mrs. Microwave experiencing a radish. Swiftly agreeing couples silently disagreeing. Germ phobic Mr. X whispering to waiter: *Ammonia on the side, son*. Merry minister whose authority had destroyed his religiosity. Friends and lovers gagged by familiarity: mouths knotted. Words in the air but not said: *harangue, chronicle, supercilious, post*

*mortem, feast, banquet, scorch, gall, ho hum, satire, anoint, moribund, conical, repast, sick.* Blond woman feeding on the sight of a man feeding on the sight of her lace whatchamhoozie. Steak tragically parked on a dieter's plate like a Peugeot in the garage of a Sunday driver. Turquoise, toupees, barrier reef wigs, carnations, dentures. DR. MILLER IN DERBY AND DRIVING GLOVES!? No, not him, another pear-shaped sanctimonious Great White Father tottering toward a signature edition Lincoln, wife number whatever on his arm. I spotted the fuchsia scarf of Eleanor Rigby! She had removed her face from the jar by the door! She kept doing that. I saw her all over the metro area. Twice or three times a day. Just like I saw the old brown shoe the Beatles sang about, and Mr. Mustard, and Maxwell with the silver mustang and Lucy with the diamonds in her skies. The Beatles had cast over the world gusts of melodies you breathed. Rigby's brooch-crusted dress, battered pink hat, spinster rectory stare! At Jumer's she was a totally ignored regular known as "Ellen" to no one but herself. My heart struggled toward her. I felt "for her" not because I was any kind of good person, but because I greedily absorbed troubles of other people in a desperate effort to displace or hold-at-bay my own woe. It worked—worked too well. Maybe I would grow up to be a lock-and-dam that regulated the ceaseless flow of sorrow emanating from American lives gone wrong. Did "Ellen" worry about me, The Waddler sandwiched between shuffling parents? She winked sadly, as if to say: *Poor thing, you really rate—dinner at Jumer's!* Bus boy glare expanded the theme. *Careful, kid. They might stick you with the bill.* But I had no fear of ending up in Jumer's Kitchen, wearing an iron apron and suds. I was the



family dishwasher when Plate Mountain got high enough, surely higher than it ever rose in a well-ordered Bavarian kitchen. “Benny! Oh honey! Chain-mail!” Yes, we had arrived. We had. It kept dawning—this new night. The setbacks in the past and fear of losses to come—could, and could not, stop us. We went on, somehow. Failure was a definite path too; it led many places, some fabulous! I had in my faltering way dragged a couple back to Camelot, where they needed to go for a reality check, odd as it sounds. They married into the era of Jack and Jackie. Things weren’t bad then—she bathed regularly and wore jewelry, he was the future County Attorney—bright newlyweds! I had seen one photo. From under couches I had dredged records she sang along to when I was very little—before she became swollen and atonal. Broadway cast recordings now ancient, warped and scratched, covers peed on by cats. *My Fair Lady*, *Fiddler on the Roof*, *West Side Story*. Fourteen years ago and many centuries! We passed empty tables set for service—goblets and linen napkins. Where was Stiletto going to seat us? Next county? On Pluto? Some special place where we would not be seen by the other diners. *FLASH!* Bavarian waitress clicked a photo of a couple old enough to know better than to strike that unspeakable pose, but there was scant hope for any soul in front of an instamatic. Mother pointed out a table under weapons that might be used on any waiter who did not bring more pee-can rolls. “Afraid that’s reserved!” “Reserved? But this is our BIRTHDAY BOY!” She stroked my head with her warm damp paw. Moby Purse expectorated aspirin and butterscotch hard candies. Lipstick smiled, frowned, smiled at “A Birthday Boy!? How old?” Mother answered in her post-musical whine:

“He’s thirteen! A BIG BOY! How I miss the curls! He used to have curls, and...” They were cut off when I was five and she never got over it. She searched my scalp for lost curls. I smelled peanut butter breath, sour sweat. I looked up at the massive ceiling beams. They could not be hollow. They were heavy, strapping, something to think about at night when I could not sleep after the foot rubs—STRUCTURE a more comforting image than loping sheep or cemetery fields of roses which came easily to mind. I filed Jumer’s beams away. Diners stared as if I were an oily museum painting *Landscape with Young Gourmand*. Did they—did father?—see *her fingerprints* on my feet, arms, neck, cheeks? With each touch, a voice, always. On the small ship of our porch—framed by the maple tree on one edge of the front terrace, and evergreen on the opposite edge, she whispered: “*Someday branches will touch. The branches will JOIN. And we’ll have shade, you and I, all summer!*” I worried about that. G-forces—GUILT FORCES—worked me over good on my BIG DAY, during the “dinner out,” as often happened at Sudlow or in our cluttered living room. I felt my face stretching stretching into a doomed and insatiable Greek mask—chin dragging across carpet, nose dangling around knees, mouth contorting to encircle the huge SORRY that need be said to parents and neighbors and teachers, and myself, and God. Couldn’t do it—expel that rennety curd of grief. I imagined dying. I was always prone to death visions on my birthday. I imagined shish kabob skewer impalement. I bumped a vaulted roundtable throne, drew a disapproving look (and snort) from Galahad, car dealer, and my father’s head turned—leprotic lips melting apart. I prayed to the yellow teeth, gray gums: *help me deal*

with her, help push her away, you save her... “Angel! Look!” Hound-in-a-fringe-collar painting. “I’d know him anywhere! *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog* by Dylan Thomas! You must read it!” I must... when the harassing howl of her recommendation faded. How long had it been since we entered the castle? Was I 14 going on 44 yet? Hostess Stiletto, ducked into a niche in the back of the back dining room: “Okee-dokie folks! Waiter will be with you soon! Enjoy your dinner!” Paranoid translation: *Enjoy your freakin’ once-a-year fancy-shmancy blow-out you busted buffoons.* We crept into a paneled library that may have been much larger before the flip of a Poe switch caused book-lined walls to squeeze in in in in... leaving room enough only room for a rectangular table, napkin coronets. Ladders on the twenty foot tall shelving! Uniform editions of ZOLA, DICKENS, CONRAD, BALZAC. Half way up one wall existed the most beautiful thing I had seen in a long time: a decorative balcony too narrow to support any human dilemma. Airy ornate railing! And Arthurian seat cushions! We could each sit in two if we wanted... but we did not spread out, we sat close together, chastened by our luck. Humbled at last. The room belonged to classics: they were fully in charge, and ascendant! For a minute we could not screw it up. We sat in reverent silence, each of us thick with thin surfaces. Father lit up. Smoke marooning air as if a truth were trying to burn through invisible veils of denial. Then a humorless Bavarian waiter entered: vest, forearm fur. He distributed tasseled menus. (Or tasseled in my imagination.) He arched nostrils when we demanded a bread basket only, make it two bread baskets. They came. They did not disappoint. Wonders of wicker and warm linen and carbohydrates! We tore

into caraway rye rolls, sesame bread sticks, raison puffs, braided white rolls, salt-pebbled hard rolls, pumpernickel squares, slightly sticky pecan rolls. Had one of us sprained a wrist with our tearing, stiff menus would have served nicely as splints. No one sprained a wrist, though. We were expert scavengers. We emptied both baskets in fifteen minutes, and reamed clean the miniature butter urns. Father lit up again. Mother did her ritualistic things—itching, misquoting, purse-mining, kneading my upper parts. I could not tell her to stop that night, or three years later, or seven years later—as I could not tell Mrs. Goldman I did not want to dance on the Jumer's disco floor after hearing about her chest scars. Something in me—some irregular cog—dictated that I, while flinching and shuddering, must admire these women for being unfailingly frightful, or who they were, or who fate had made them to be. It was true: I tended to put the interests of others far ahead of my own, quite a miracle, really, given how much time I spent in the caverns of my own head—far from other people. I gazed up at the book walls. Any second shelves might tremble, slide, smash us! Make us pay for massive library fines and wavering allegiance to knowledge! My parents met in the fall of 1962 at a monthly meeting of The Great Ideas Club in Dick Keeley's A-frame pad in Moline... yet all their reading (and my own) what had it amounted to so far? We remained profoundly afraid of learning and the responsibility that went with. We knew the facts too well to trust them. Our lies to ourselves, and each other, mounted daily. We were farcical wasters of time's valuable currency. Super 8 family films disintegrated under coats piled on the floor of the closet where Moonbeam cat had her kittens. Desiccated

shoeboxes housed snapshots of relatives who appeared to be suspended in a curdled puddles of blue carbolic milk. How could history impact and mold transform each second and yet still be denied with an effectiveness that transformed us into big fat squawking blanks? How? Because our living concealed our lives. In a father's smoke, and on mother's breath, a stench of scorned and incinerated evidence. There was much worthy of disowning. And the curse of mendacity and vagueness made the house dirtier and dirtier with zonked-out melodrama—1970s set with 1930s costumes and the Greek plot and Lewis Carroll dialogue. Grave details which could not be buried or undermined—they poked through murk like unscrolling weeds—but we knew how to cut them down—with a cough or giggle or other indulgent blurt. It was the denials—not the truth—that best resisted destruction. Illusions were very deeply rooted in us, thriving on the richness of terror. Other citizens helped with the watering. No one actually wanted to know how bad things had gotten next door. Neighbors had their verdant forms of denial, as we had ours. It was a kind of urban cash crop. It kept assuming new forms—as the truth was incapable of doing. The truth was one thing and one thing only. My eyes did not dare linger long on the stray shoes scattered on the living room floor like tips of islands amid violent currents of mockery that had flushed away everything else. When at my best I could—for a second—want the scattered shoes to fuse and form a leathery tree of wisdom. But would answers heal or crush? We had done things to each other, and to ourselves, that could not be erased, and maybe never forgiven. It was no accident our response to the trouble was to twist and wrangle each day into the monotonous procedure of hoping

for less and less, and finally—what? Another bread basket at most! More caraway rolls! Willing yourself into the primitive state of hunching grunting scrap muncher, you were the farthest from, and so most protected from, that faint but inextinguishable hunger for the madness to end, no matter what it did cost. My formative years! Formative years? More like an engine of formlessness fueled by cruel echoes of suffering predating my birth, mysterious grief attached to shameful events only hinted at, hidden in the drawers of moans. **Mother:** *I jumped out of the car, rolled into a ditch next to railroad tracks next to the canal... mother sent me to fetch father from a tavern... went to Bible Camp for the food and it was awful... teacher thought I was retarded, moved me to a special class... jumped out of the car, rolled... farmer wouldn't let us hired hands eat butter at his table... drafted by the army and they got a surprise when this Tommy reported... found a peanut butter sandwich in a study carrel in the Law School library, nothing ever tasted so good... lived in New York on Jane Street until I got pneumonia, came home... only woman in my law school class... I can't take it anymore, let's run away, you and I... listen to the wind chimes, honey...* **Father:** *German POWs mowed our lawn when Dad ran the Virginia military hospital... Frank tore up my cartoons, slipped pieces under the locked bedroom door... broke my leg pushing a friend's car stuck in the snow one night... Dad set the bone in his office downtown, only light on in the building, accusing me of meddling in the affairs of others... didn't want to be a doctor like Frank and Herb... sang a solo at my high school graduation... dropped out of Columbia after one semester, entered the seminary program at Notre Dame... dropped out*

*of Notre Dame, wrote those novels in the basement... never ran again after Dad set the leg... lived over a typewriter store while studying law at Iowa... had a beer with Wright Morris, went to a reading by Dos Passos... friend's car got stuck and Had shelves moved? BALZAC, ZOLA appeared inches closer to the table, room felt snugger, nicely so. Library did not have to flatten us, did it? Instead it could teach us lesson, correct? Shelves pressing just hard enough to reshape our horrible attitudes? To sculpt emotions, making them easier to handle, sort, and classify? Mr. Fur entered, cradling the third bread basket. He demanded we order. Sausage names scared me off, a result of over-familiarity with factory scenes in *The Jungle* by Upton Sinclair. Pheasant "under glass" beckoned but... it sounded too much like old Lenin in his crystal tomb. I uh, um, picked fried chicken in honey batter. My father approved: I earned the pleased as opposed to haughty hrummyh. He took a wild chance on a cheeseburger. Mother decided the rolls had filled her up. Mr. Fur charged away. Food came. We stuffed our faces... then a candle glided into the room followed by staff—all Mr. Furs, all Ms. Stilettos, and Black Forest cake! I shut my eyes. First I wished to be thin. Then I wished for this inspired and generous ending to endure—the sweetly lit slice of forest never to darken—as happened moments later, when I did what must be done, teeth clenched. Waiters clapped. Hostesses hooted. Parents strained to grin, knowing one thing for certain—wishes could bring out the worst in a person, lead a life astray in a way that mistakes could not match.*

# Troades

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by Jason Newport

Occasionally I find it worth remembering that Euripides only won second prize for *Trojan Women*, losing out that year to yet another *Oedipus* remake by some rube named Xenocles. As if Queen Hecuba wouldn't wipe the floor with that silly milf Jocasta. Because if anyone had a right to hang herself in despair, it was Hecuba, who endured ten years of siege only to see her beloved old husband overthrown and slain, her city and empire demolished, fifty sons all dead, a boatload of daughters raped and enslaved, and—adding insult to injury—a little grandson tossed from the ruined battlements, scraped off the rocks, and handed back for her to bury while a Greek ship waited to carry her away into bondage forever. And yet, Hecuba doesn't string herself up, doesn't throw herself into the sea or onto the nearest knife point, doesn't gouge her own eyes out and make one of her girls lead her around, begging. Far from it. Hecuba buries little Astyanax on his heroic father's shield and then she gets on the boat. Because she's a leader of women. Despite all the hapless Jocasta retreads to the contrary, Hecuba's is the truth that prevails: that most women stand more misfortune, more suffering, better than any man or god.

That's why, at the start of his play (known as *Troades* in French), Euripides shows Poseidon



bawling over the broken walls of Troy, but it's Athena who shows up and lets him know how to get even.

I like to think she dropped in on Euripides, too, and that's why a couple of thousand years later anyone you ask, in any language, will say, "Xenocles who?"

# Whatever Normal Means Now

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by Joyce Tomlinson

The summer of 1967 was blistering hot. I turned 16 during a record dry spell, when every lawn in the neighborhood was brown and brittle. I sat on my front steps while Nick stood over me with his back to the street. He smoked a cigarette while I nervously twisted a string of my long hair between my fingers, trying to figure out just how late my period was. Nick was annoyed, and scared.

“You gotta do something about that.” He said.

“What do you want me to do?” Really, I had no idea.

Nick had charisma like crazy. He oozed testosterone or pheromones or whatever chemical it is that makes girls break into a sweat and forget everything their mamas told them. He got into fights at Dick’s Drive-In on Friday nights and danced just like James Brown. All muscle and smooth talk. I had no defense against the guy.

“Do something,” Nick said. He started down the sidewalk toward his house.

Halfway down the block he turned. “I’m serious. Figure it out.”

\* \* \*

The chemistry between us had been potent; we couldn’t get enough of each other. I was fifteen the

first time our make-out sessions became more intense. Any conflict I had about losing my virginity was obliterated by the force of my newly awakened passion. When Nick and I were together, we rarely left his basement. It was the perfect set up for sex—stereo, sofa *and* bed, television and a dimmer on the lights.

My mother had begun to notice the intensity of my relationship with Nick and decided it was time to do something about it. She and her boyfriend, Bruce, planned to take me to look at a Vancouver boarding school where she was hoping to stash me until I got over my first love affair.

Even as I climbed in to the back seat of Bruce's car that day I knew there was a pretty good possibility that I was pregnant. I hadn't told anyone I was late except Nick. For the Vancouver trip, I'd decided to keep my worries to myself. I would play a girl-at-risk, girl-who-could-still-be-saved.

The Queen Mary School was an old Victorian home with a covered porch and stained glass windows. Gardens framed the structure, and a barn with an equestrian ring stood behind it, next to a tennis court. Little gasps escaped me as we entered each classroom, where tidy wooden desks were lined up on polished hardwood floors covered with braided rugs. I never knew anything so wonderful existed.

"Here at Queen Mary School we are a family," the headmistress repeatedly told us.

I wanted to move in immediately. I wanted to be part of that family, where learning was most important. I could see myself in the Queen Mary School uniform, getting straight A's, going to college. I had the impression that my parents thought college was a waste of time. But this was a chance. All the way

home, I prayed that I would discover I wasn't pregnant after all. Maybe a miracle would happen.

Soon after our visit to The Queen Mary's School, my mother asked, "Could you be pregnant?"

I couldn't quite look at her face as I whispered yes.

"I thought so," she said. "My god Joyce, how could you do this to me?"

A few weeks later I found a letter from the headmistress to my mother. Mom had written a note explaining why I wouldn't be able to take the position I was offered at Queen Mary. It read in part, "...how unfortunate it is when young girls find themselves in such a situation. It is regrettable that Joyce will not be able to take advantage of all Queen Mary has to offer."

I sighed as I dropped the letter in the trash.

\* \* \*

A meeting was arranged to decide what should be done. Nick's parents sat on the edge of their chairs with their hands folded on their laps. The Sokovs were Russian immigrants and struggled with English, but their faces said they were fully aware of the situation.

One Friday night Nick and I had joined his folks for a dance at the Russian Club where the centerpiece on every table was a giant bottle of vodka.

"Come, have some." His mother pushed a shot glass towards me. Her friends smiled encouragingly.

"Are you sure?" I looked from Nick to his mother and back again.

"Da, da, is not going to hurt you. Is *good* for you." She and her friends laughed gently, like they were watching a baby take her first bite of solid food. They thought my hesitancy was adorable. I took one swig,

and then another. Soon Nick and I were up dancing the polka to incredibly loud accordion music. And by the end of the evening we were behind the bandstand making out.

“Your son is over 18. We could take him to court and sue him for statutory rape.” This was Bruce’s idea of a conversation starter. I sank down, trying to disappear.

Mrs. Sokov pulled herself up and said, “Why are you even here? Where is her father? Who are you to speak for this family?”

My mother looked uncomfortable but answered, “Her father lives in Hawaii. He can’t be here. Bruce is helping me out.”

Mrs. Sokov shook her head sadly. “The father should be here.”

Mrs. Sokov turned to Nick and gestured toward me. “We want you to marry this girl. She’s having a baby, you need to marry.” She put her hand on his arm and gave a little push. “Ask her, son. Go ahead.”

Seconds passed awkwardly. Finally, Nick turned to me. “Come in the kitchen” he said quietly, his face close to mine.

I followed him out of the room, leaving the adults glaring at each other. Once in the kitchen, Nick managed a fairly romantic proposal, considering the circumstances.

“Do you really want to do this?” I asked. We held each other’s hands, mustering up as much emotional connection as possible.

“Sure I do, I just didn’t want to ask you like this,” he said, and kissed me.

We went back in and told our parents we were getting married. While my mother pursed her lips in stricken disapproval, the Sokovs jumped up and

hugged both of us. Mrs. Sokov pulled a handkerchief out of her pocket, and carefully unwrapped what she had tucked inside it in anticipation of this likelihood. With reverential ceremony she put a communion wafer in each of our mouths and kissed our cheeks in the European way. It was official.

My mother had mixed feelings. Over the next few weeks I found brochures from homes for unwed mothers in the mailbox, but we never talked about them. When Nick came to the house, Mom told him in no uncertain terms what a low-life she thought he was, then the next day she'd take me shopping for a wedding dress.

Dad called her from Hawaii and the two of them talked about abortion. It was well before Roe V. Wade, so we would have to go to a country where it was legal. Since my father was in Hawaii, he suggested Japan. I could stay with him afterwards and go to school in Honolulu for the rest of the school year.

To my surprise, I had a college fund, set up by my parents when they divorced, with just the right amount of money in it for a trip for two to Tokyo. My sister's share had paid for her wedding. My father strongly urged that mine be used to take care of my "problem."

I still wanted to have the baby, but it began to look like if I did it would be without Nick. He started to go missing for days at a time. When I called him, he wouldn't answer. His boss at work said he wasn't in. His friends told me they hadn't seen him.

When he did show up briefly, he sometimes frightened me. One sunny September day he drove me past the cemetery and laughed in a disturbing way as he pointed out the baby section lined with little white crosses.

Nick came by on a Saturday to take me for a ride on a friend's motorcycle. I was excited as I climbed onto the back and put my arms around his waist. The sun was shining and my hair whipped around in the wind. We drove around the neighborhood for a few minutes, and then suddenly he picked up speed and flew down a steep hill as fast as he could. At the bottom, he slammed on his breaks, and sent me flying off the back of the bike. Even though I landed on the grassy parking strip, blood dripped down my leg from a gash on my knee. He had a twisted smile on his face.

The next day I went for a long walk and thought about my options. Time was my enemy. The longer I waited to make a decision the worse things got. It was obvious that Nick didn't want to get married. Knowing that he had been forced into proposing was humiliating. He had been the pursuer, the one so madly in love. Now I was the needy one. I wanted to think there was hope for us, that he and the baby and I could still be a family.

As I stepped off the curb near Nick's house, a red convertible drove by, top down and music blasting. Driving the car was a pretty blonde, and sitting right next to her in the front seat was Nick. He didn't see me stop short and choke on my breath, watching as they drove by. Adrenaline surged through my body, and all I wanted to do was get away. I just wanted to be a normal sixteen-year-old again, without life and death decisions to make. Nick could so easily move on and have fun without having to worry about me.

I got home as fast as I could, and ran straight to the phone. I called my mother at work. "I want to go to Hawaii," I said. "I want to go right away, now." I didn't know if I'd have an abortion or have the baby in Honolulu, but either way I was getting away.

\* \* \*

I yanked my suitcase off the baggage conveyer. The sun shone in through the airport windows and I peeled off my sweater. I was relieved to see Dad and Donna there to pick me up, but I felt self-conscious and embarrassed. Dad put a lei around my neck. I knew they couldn't be too happy about the appearance of a pregnant teenager. Dad and I hadn't lived together for six years, and I had never even spent one night under the same roof as Donna. They had sailed to Hawaii on a 38 foot boat, and were living aboard for a year.

The cabin of the boat was even smaller than I remembered. My bunk was in the main part of the cabin across from the tiny galley. The head was between the galley and the bow where my dad and Donna slept. All the shelves had rails across the fronts so that books and dishes would stay put when the boat heeled. Shame oozed out every pore of my body when I saw that one whole shelf was filled with books on how to deal with teenagers in crisis.

The day after I arrived in Honolulu, Dad took me to the doctor to get shots for the trip to Japan. A nurse with syringe poised above my arm asked me if I was pregnant. I thought about this question. If I said no, I would get the shot and the baby would probably be damaged. If I said yes, she might not give me the shot and I wouldn't be able to go to Japan.

I took a deep breath and said "No." The moment the shot hit my arm, I blacked out. When I woke up I was laying down on a cot. Now I'd have to go through with it.

\* \* \*



My dad and I landed at the Narita Airport in Tokyo, and went directly to the clinic. We were quiet on the way, overwhelmed by the thousands of huge bright-colored billboards and the frenzied traffic. Our car jerked back and forth, weaving through the chaos of the city streets, ending at what looked like a small apartment building. Dad checked the address, which was written both in Japanese characters and in English on the gate.

Our overnight bags in hand, we climbed the stairs of the clinic and added our shoes to the others neatly lined up on the top steps. A nurse met us at the door, and communicating with smiles and gestures, led us through the hallways of the clinic.

It was more like someone's home than a hospital. We passed by what looked like Western bedrooms, with four poster beds and dressers. All the paintings on the walls were Japanese style though, beautiful and serene—a stark contrast to the decidedly UN-serene way I was feeling. The food-mixed-with-bleach odor that permeated the place, combined with anxiety, brought back the old morning sickness that I thought I was passed.

We were shown into an office to wait for the doctor. The room was lit by a single lamp, which made the room feel dusky. The room was small and cluttered, with shelves full of books and a tea kettle on a hot plate. On the desk there was a model of a woman's pregnant body that you could take apart to see how her insides fit together. I rubbed my stomach.

Finally the doctor came into his office. In perfect English he explained the procedure. He pulled out a photograph of a fetus at my baby's stage of development, its limbs and features easily identifiable. I

hadn't realized how developed the baby was at four months. You could see that this was a human being, with arms and legs and the beginnings of a face.

My pregnancy didn't show yet, and I hadn't felt any movement. Until then it had been all me, about Nick and our parents. But looking at that photograph, I fully realized that I was about to end a life.

"This is a second trimester procedure," the doctor said, looking directly at me. "We'll have to induce labor. It will be painful."

I couldn't take my eyes off that picture. My father didn't say a word.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" the doctor said.

I went through the last few months in my mind. I had shots that probably damaged the baby. I spent my entire college fund on this trip. My father and I had flown thousands of miles. The baby's father had bucked me from a motorcycle, and he wanted nothing to do with me or the baby. I was sixteen.

I nodded.

\* \* \*

One summer day when I was twenty and newly married, I ended up back in the old neighborhood just long enough to transfer buses. I stood at the intersection of the main drag and the street where I'd lived with my mom and my sister, around the corner from the Sokovs.

I felt like that sixteen-year-old again, the girl who'd had to make such a wrenching choice. Any woman who has an abortion handles it in her own way. My way was tearful. My baby was gone, and so was my dream of creating a happy family—the chance

to replace the intact family I'd lost when my parents divorced. While I waited for the bus that day, I thought about what it was like to go back to Hawaii from Japan, broken, guilt-ridden and miserable. My dad took me to McKinley High once we were back in Honolulu and signed me up. After that, I got on the city bus almost every morning and rode straight past the school to the stop near the beach. Going to school was the last thing on earth I wanted to do. Instead, I spent my time sleeping on the sand, wading in shallow water, reading—a sixteen-year-old in mourning. I cried, I slept, I walked, I cried, I read, I cried. Then I got back on the bus and rode to the high school where my dad picked me up, like I'd been there all day.

When we first got back to Honolulu, I went to the emergency room with a painful infection—a complication from the abortion—and then laid awake nights worrying that I would be sterile, worrying that when I died, sterile and alone, I'd go to hell. I had nightmares that the doctor in Japan kept the bodies of the babies he aborted and was doing experiments on them, that there were incubators at the clinic that kept the babies alive for some twisted, sadistic reason.

On top of that, my dad, stepmother and I were crammed into a 38 foot sailboat. Nerves were beginning to fray all around. I was half angry and half grateful that my dad had kept my trip to Japan a secret from the other boaters on our dock. I liked that he was protective of me, but I knew a big part of the secrecy was that he was mortified by my situation.

On Thanksgiving we were invited to dinner with another live-aboard family at the marina—turkey dinner in a sailboat galley. They were from California, spending a few months in Hawaii on their way to the

South Pacific. That night the conversation turned to the differences between the Hawaiian Islands. I listened as one by one everyone named their favorite island and what they liked about it. Suddenly all eyes were on me, and I realized that I was expected to have a preference too.

Aha, I thought. So, this had been the cover story. This was what my father had told his friends at the marina: he had taken me on a tour of the islands when I first arrived. The only problem was that he forgot to let me in on the lie. I had no idea what to answer because I'd never been to any other island besides Oahu.

After a long, embarrassed pause I said, "I guess I like Oahu the best." I felt a rush of humiliation, a deep knowledge that my father was ashamed of me. It would have been liberating to tell the truth, but I didn't want to make my dad feel worse by telling the truth right there in front of everyone. I wanted to save him from me, from being the dad of a wayward girl.

In my dreams that night I was back at the clinic. I saw a nurse walk into my room and approach a cupboard with floor-to-ceiling wooden doors, and as she opened the doors hundreds of blood soaked sanitary pads spilled out onto the floor, cascading from the top shelf in wave after wave, and then the pads became bloody fetuses silently falling, and falling...

On the first of December I found a pay phone and called my mom back in Seattle, collect.

"I can't stand it here Mom," I sobbed into the phone. "You have to let me come home."

"What does your father say about that?" she wanted to know.

"I don't know. I don't care." I blubbered. "I just want to be home." I thought if I could just get home, I could leave the nightmares behind.

My parents gave in and booked me on a flight back to Seattle. Holiday decorations began to appear in store windows all over Honolulu—Santa on a surfboard, Mrs. Claus in a hula skirt—and steel guitar Christmas carols started playing at the mall. I'd been away from home for just two months, but it seemed like so much longer.

The night before I left Hawaii, my father took me for a drive. Monsoon rains pelted the car as we pulled into the parking lot of the marina. Deep puddles merged into one huge lake and the smell of wet asphalt seeped into the car. The constant drone of water insects almost completely eclipsed the traffic noise from the highway. I could tell Dad had something to say to me and I knew he was stalling. He hadn't said much at all as we drove, and I guess he figured it was now or never.

"Joycey, I know this has been hard for you," he began.

"I know how much you love babies," he said. "But you'll have more babies someday."

I looked outside at the rain hitting the pavement.

"Just remember, you don't have to tell anyone about this... no one's business... upsetting to everyone... boys you'll meet... married someday..."

I couldn't look at his face. "I just want to go home," I said. "I just want everything to be... I don't know... normal." Whatever normal was now.

\* \* \*

A few days after I got home I got a call from Nick. Hearing his voice on the phone was like hearing an air raid siren—startling, adrenaline producing, strangely exciting. Like my brain was issuing an urgent message: **WARNING! WARNING!**

He wanted to talk. I was nervous—I didn't know how it would feel to see him again—but I told myself it was the right thing to do. After all, he was the baby's father. He had a right to know where I'd been and what I'd done. I'd see him again, just this one time, to explain.

The morning before we met up I looked hard at myself in the mirror, trying to decide if I looked any different on the outside. It was hard to tell. I put my hair in a ponytail, and then took it out. Put lipstick on and then wiped it off. Put liner around my eyes and mascara on my lashes and left it on. I probably changed five times before I settled on an outfit.

We met outside on the sidewalk, halfway between his house and mine. We said hello awkwardly and sat down on a corner bulkhead. My hands were shaking, so I pushed them into my pockets. I was glad I'd worn the pants with pockets.

It had only been a couple of months since I'd seen him, but I felt so changed that I expected him to be different too. He looked the same though, handsome in that Eastern European way. His straight blond hair still fell across that broad Russian forehead and brushed his eyebrows, same as always. He still had those ridiculous cheekbones, those blue eyes.

I studied his face, and as my eyes moved to his neck and down to his muscular arms and square hands, a kaleidoscope of butterflies took flight inside my gut and flew straight up into my chest. Against my will, against all my good sense, that old familiar sensation shot through me, that electric charge I always got around him. After everything, I felt that same damn feeling.

"I heard you went to Hawaii," he said. "I wanted to go over there and find you and bring you home. You

know, just show up at the dock and yell your name until you came and found me.” It sounded like a scene from a movie.

I watched his mouth as he took a drag off his cigarette... Lord, that mouth.

“You didn’t though,” I said. Images of his basement floated into my mind, his bedroom with the lights dimmed and the music playing, all hot breath and... I pushed them away.

“You should’ve told me where you were,” he said. Smoke streamed slowly out his nose and between his barely parted lips. “I had to find out from your cousin.”

“I didn’t think you cared where I was,” I said, looking down at my hands. Moments passed. I forced myself not to touch him.

“So,” he asked me. “When is it due?”

I looked up at his face and tried to decide if he really didn’t know.

“I went to Japan, Nick, can’t you see I’m not pregnant anymore? I had... an... ah... abortion.” I felt my face color. I hadn’t said it out loud before that moment.

Nick acted surprised, but I thought it seems pretty obvious.

And then he looked right into my eyes and said, “Jesus, Joyce, you killed my baby.”

I couldn’t breathe.

“Don’t say that,” I finally managed to squeak out. “Jeez Nick, what was I supposed to do?”

He didn’t have an answer to that—I didn’t really expect him to. We sat there without talking for a few minutes. Finally he took a small box out of his pocket and opened it.

“I got this for you,” he said. It was a diamond ring with rubies, my birthstone.

“What is this for?” I was surprised, and confused.

“It was supposed to be an engagement ring,” he said. “I guess now it’s a promise ring.”

I took the ring and tried it on. I probably should’ve turned it down immediately, but now the battle seriously began to escalate between my good sense and the butterflies. Maybe he really loved me after all. It made me feel a little less abandoned, less foolish. Maybe I wanted to pretend for just a little while that I could keep it and we could patch things up and I could take him back and it would all be like it used to be, only better. That it—that he—would be different.

“Thank you. It’s beautiful.” I held my hand out so he could see how it looked. Which was a mistake, because it made him smile, that smile that had started all the trouble.

“What will your mother say when she finds out about the baby?” I asked him. I hadn’t seen Nick’s parents since the day his folks coerced him into proposing.

“She’ll say that you did what was good for you,” he said. “But not for me.”

Clouds started to gather. I pulled my sweater tight around me.

“My mom doesn’t know I’m meeting you. She would be so mad,” I said.

“She hates my guts,” Nick said.

“She really does,” I said.

We said goodbye like we’d see each other soon. Even after I walked away, I could still smell his scent. I could so easily have turned back.

But a voice inside me—a voice that had been waiting for the chance to be heard—argued that I could choose something different. The voice reminded me of the motorcycle ride, the blonde in the convertible.



I didn't have to give in to my feelings, it said. I could choose to move on and see what else the world might have for me. It was very convincing, that voice. And so, I pushed down every bit of feeling I had for him, and turned the corner toward home.

The next day I went to the post office and mailed the ring back to Nick, and I didn't see him again until that day, many years later, when I was waiting for the bus.

There I stood—waiting on the sidewalk in the old neighborhood, looking up the street, watching for the bus. Just then, whoever is in charge of the universe got a seriously quirky whim and sent Nick out the door of Al's Tavern right next to the bus stop. I quickly turned my back and tried to be invisible, but Nick saw me and came over to say hello.

He was disheveled, as if he'd been in the tavern all afternoon, and he squinted as his eyes adjusted to the daylight. His blond hair looked stringy and unwashed, and his face was blotchy, as if he was allergic to his own facial hair.

"I'm married now," I blurted out, first thing. "I'm on my way home. My husband is waiting for me." I bit my lip to keep it from trembling. I was annoyed with myself for being afraid of him.

"You look good," he said, slightly slurring his words. "You working?"

"Yeah, working. Going to school," I nodded.

"You live around here?" He sucked on his cigarette.

"U-District," I said. I knew I was blushing. I felt sweaty. "You still at home?" I asked him.

"Yeah." He smelled like beer. Lots of beer, and stale smoke.

"Got a job?" I asked him.

“Nah, not yet.” He put his hand over his mouth and stifled a burp. “Sorry,” he said, with an embarrassed grin. He ran his hand through his filthy hair and swayed slightly, unsteady on his feet.

I backed up a step or two.

Then, like a golden chariot sent from the gods, the #24 bus pulled up and we said goodbye. I sat down close to the driver and watched out the window as Nick walked away. He turned and peered back at the bus, but I don’t think he could spot me through the window. Seeing him in such rough shape was startling. I didn’t know what had happened to him, I just knew I was shaken, that he had scared me, and that I was glad to get away from him.

I sank into my seat and watched the city go by. It had been a long while since I’d had a nightmare. They’d become less and less frequent, until they almost disappeared. The baby would be four years old now. I knew that for the rest of my life I would count out how old that child, that teenager, that man, would be at every turn. For years I would look at every little blond kid and wonder if that’s what he would’ve looked like. But I would never, ever regret my decision to send back that ring.

I met my husband Gary at the college where I got a scholarship and after forty years, against all odds, we’re still happily married. He is everything that Nick wasn’t—steady, reliable, even-tempered. We had three kids, and then decided to adopt a fourth. I hoped that helped to even the score with the universe—I took one life, and I gave one little soul a home.

# Scowler

---

by Ron Spalletta

After our fight, I rode my not-suitable-for-a-dramatic-  
exit  
bicycle to the museum and the new exhibit we were  
going to see

together. In the ransacked tomb of a lesser-known,  
upper-level  
regional administrator of later ancient Egypt it was  
clear

the gold was gone, as were all things potentially  
precious. The rings,  
necklaces and other bodily ornaments were stolen  
with the body,

but the skull was dropped, an upturned cup on the  
smashed sarcophagus.  
Also left were seven hundred miniature boats.

Each carried some small carving of a need for the  
hereafter: servants, priests,  
incense, food, cooks, craftsmen and their shops and  
tools, an entire city

on a tiny flotilla ready to cross the river to meet  
Osiris

and begin anew. Spells and incantations covered  
every surface  
of the tomb, a thorough map of the underworld and  
its monsters  
was etched into the wood near the mummy's head.

I imagined your loud voice booming among the  
glass cases:  
*Why are the boats so small? Will the figures come  
to life? Which organs*

*will he put back in first?* But I stopped, distracted,  
when I saw the sandals:  
one pair, life-size, left out and ready for when the  
mummy awakens.

Unlike everything else, they were simple, comfortable.  
Perfect  
to slip on and stumble to the coffee maker on some  
warm Saturday morning.

How much better then, on the promised day  
when the mummy opens his sarcophagus, replaces  
his organs,

and rides his spectral armada through the underworld,  
past beasts  
named Scowler, He-of-the-Loud-Voice, He-Whose-  
Face-is-Hot, Oppressor,

and Trembler. But before that, and before he founds  
his new city  
among the Abodes of Those-Who-Live-on-Sweet-  
Things, he puts on

sandals someone carved and sized for him. I began  
home again,  
and traveled through the farmer's market beneath  
the gaze of

He-Whose-Face-is-Hot in the oppressive summer  
heat. In my pack I gathered  
two apricots, two plums, two nectarines and the  
hope that they

would startle you when you came home to find  
them in a cold porcelain cup,  
that the unanticipated gift would help set your heart  
in its right place again.

# This Is What Faith Looks Like

---

by Derold Sligh

*All I have to offer my poor people  
is this apple in my hand, doctor,  
one red apple.*

—Nazim Hikmet

It hovers over your head,  
ballooned and red,  
tethered by a string.

Lying there folded  
like an unread letter,

sprawled next to the lion's hunger—  
this is what faith looks like,

like sparrows pecking at invisible pianos  
on the sidewalk—

the birds bow in excitement  
as you close in. One leaves early,  
startling the others,

then they rise in a hue  
of dust toward the horizon.  
They want you to follow.

It feels things out like hair—  
on the forearms and the top of the head,  
measures spaces like whiskers.

Placed out in front of you  
like a lance.  
This is what faith looks like.

The fog on grandma's kitchen windows  
clings to its transparent prison.  
It wants to escape and commune

with the frost  
on the other side of the glass.  
It is November in Detroit,

which means the smell of snow  
and exhaust hangs heavy in the air.  
My grandmother has just melted  
the ice ball in my chest with her smile.  
I ride on her shoulders.  
I fit there nicely.

She is waist-deep in Detroit.  
Like a river (she is a river),  
she carries anything she is given—

leaves and snow, twigs  
and Styrofoam plates,  
old underwear too small

for a growing grandson.  
She turns what she is bequeathed  
into useful things

like rags, patches, and rope.  
She makes use of whatever she's awarded—  
a daughter, Detroit, a poem.

Like a river (she is a river),  
she carries what she's given.

This is what faith looks like.



# What Remains

---

by Ed Tato

Ants traipse across the railing of my porch.  
They look especially loathsome tonight—  
the gasters of their spiked striped abdomens  
distended and pronounced. They carry chunks  
of lime left from my Bombay and tonic.

They gather at the edge of what remains—  
a perfect frenzied feeding ring of ants  
not slowed by their brothers sunk in green muck.

I go to bed but do not sleep, do not  
dream of ants dragging off their dead.

# Outer Casings

---

by Daniel Aristi

What is it again that they say about books  
And their covers? So much fuss over the skull tattoo  
when  
Eventually  
Bones will *always* surface, all white and pristine. In  
any event, lobster carcasses  
Look good on chinaware—  
They look *classy*—and emit subtly  
A tribute to the sacrifices your parents Bob and  
Martha made and how they paid up  
For a good college God Bless the farm. And maybe  
at 85 I'll be able then to strip an  
Orange with a single peel,  
One neat skin motorway from Pole to Pole, ultimate  
metaphor for a life both  
Flawless and  
Fruitful.

# Golem

---

by Heather Elliott

It's been said before  
that the continents were mud  
slapped on a turtle's  
wide shell. And we're dust,  
golems of some bearded god  
who spat on the ground,  
rolled the loose, wet crumbs  
in a mold, fired up his kiln,  
sent us tumbling out  
like child-sized soldiers  
on his palm, wrote secret words  
across our foreheads.

Sometimes,  
having given up on eyes,  
I stare at people's  
foreheads, seeking clues.  
Leaning on my grocery cart,  
listening to the man  
cracking his knuckles  
with intense concentration,  
I wonder which word  
animates him now?  
Navigating the frozen  
parking lot, I see  
a blonde woman pack  
plastic bags in her van

robotically;  
I  
can hear gears working.  
What are her instructions?  
How many  
settle  
for being only  
clay?

My own mind,  
brown  
dusting of bangs  
against my  
brow—what orders

did  
my maker issue?  
So often now pages of  
letters and numbers  
remind me of herds

of animals, schools of fish.  
Alarm clock, apple  
core,  
purple ski pants  
tangle me in metaphors  
until the lake is  
a mirror, until  
my pen can open veins.

Shaken, I steal books  
filled with icy facts.  
My dad's Consumer Reports,  
Mom's dictionary  
of medicine, texts

from my sister's nursing school.  
None of them mention  
golems or the soul,  
but speak to the fragile shell  
of the body; egg  
balanced on a spoon  
and how simple to rub the  
words out, to leave the  
forehead clean and cold.

# **Tetherball**

by Kate Ruebenson

## *Anthropological*

Girls would gather around	that aluminum
pole,	
which grew from its head	that one white
string	
holding at its other end	that dirty sun orbit-
ing in circles	

The year it was put up no one remembers  
in some unforeseen year it will come down for good,  
but no one can fathom that happening  
as long as they still play

The post has been re-hammered	four times,
new ropes purchased	seven times
it's a pattern of	wearing down and
fixing up	
wearing down and fixing up	

Everything that's been situated here has been and will  
be  
three archery targets sit patiently with their green  
tarp hoods  
across the field sits the lodge, from the pit you can  
see

senior section cabins clustered cozy in a huddle/like  
 old friends  
 the Nest where all 87 of them sit in front of the fire  
 during rain storms

On windy days smells of the lake  
 of the pines passing their needles to catch on neigh-  
 boring trunks,  
 find their way on an upward breeze to the field  
 where all the grass blades  
 point to the tetherball as if to imply: something im-  
 portant happens here.

### *Historical*

Family histories couched in stories that recall origins  
 in places  
 which have since become famous  
 my friends have traveled to the Colosseum and  
 thought to themselves  
 of ancient ancestors with similar hair who sat in the  
 rows

But my family history lies in a circumference  
 with a radius of three feet,  
 at a small all-girls camp in the Adirondacks

In which it seems, almost	as if one tetherball
game	
has been in continual play	over the course of
many lives	
sustained by girls	with the family face
it will outlast me	and the next ten
daughters	

Before bed Mom would tell me about  
the glory of a victory foreseen,  
when the thing spins so fast  
it hugs the pole a million times  
she had quite the reputation back in her day  
it runs in the family—  
cousin Nancy was eight when she beat the oldest  
girl at camp  
*Do the Nancy*, became the cheer  
cousin Barbara was known to have a nasty starting  
pitch  
opponents would duck by instinct.

The stories	like the game,
continual telling	continual play.

### *Personal*

The years I played  
were a fair share of loss & win  
by legacy, I thought I should have been better  
until the game right before dinner on my last night  
as a camper,  
pulling out talent like a bunny from a hat as if to  
say, I was saving it for this  
earned me the title of magician, earned me the right  
to someday brag of my own victory

I think about myself and how I am also a conglom-  
eration of everything before me  
the flipbook generations of hands have clutched at  
soft yellow rubber,  
varying sizes of fingertips tracing the lines around  
its globe,



holding not to the ball but to the moment before  
it's out of possession and in play

and suddenly I feel timeless.

# Note to Anne

---

by Kate Ruebenson

I.

Your daddy always wore a belt  
Even to bed

And when I asked you why this was you said  
He likes to feel contained.

II.

I didn't know what that meant  
Until yesterday:

Sitting down to write a  
Poem

Thinking about how lately I've  
Been so tangential

(Wanting to feel more  
In control)

My hand led by karmic inspiration  
Reached out

To the pegs on my wall, took down  
My winter hat.

As I pulled it over my head the ideas  
Which had tried to escape

Could no longer; blocked by  
Multi-colored wool.

So I set them down carefully to the page  
Like teacups on saucers

China clay writing: simple, subtle  
How it feels

To not let go of myself  
To keep myself inside myself.

# What Insomnia Teaches Us

---

by Neil Carpathios

So you want to be a stop sign,  
says the stop sign to the yield.  
Meanwhile streets, the empty streets  
wait and wait for shoes and tires.  
Clouds slip off robes.  
A dog barking, a train  
ghosting tracks.  
And what about  
crows?  
How they roost on wires  
perfectly still without waking  
in mid-air tumbling terrified  
from dreams. My pillow  
is breastless. A bone caught  
in the wind's throat.  
Books on the shelf take moonlight  
through glass; little chameleons  
their spines. Close your eyes  
and listen hard at least once  
in your teensy life  
whatever the stop sign says.

# Now I Can Tell You

---

by Samantha Ten Eyck

Now I can tell you  
how I stained my jacket with cartoonish teardrops,  
walking down a staircase in the Bronx  
to the corner store for Drano & Dutch Masters,  
high on, but underwhelmed by, the ecstasy  
I took with a coworker  
because it was there  
& it was free.  
I can tell you how we danced to Patti Smith  
in his living room  
until it was time to go to work & blog about  
*Top Chef* & *CSI: Miami*.  
I can tell you about Angelique,  
a dominatrix with one arm who  
could still show you the ropes.  
I can tell you how the sun setting in Washington  
Heights  
illuminated the syringes & glass in the dirt,  
like urban pearls—  
beautiful at a calculated distance,  
like flying into a populated city,  
idealizing the grid from thousands of feet.  
I can tell you about 4th of July on a rooftop  
in the lower east side,  
how we couldn't see the fireworks but still looked  
in the direction of the explosions.  
How I got drunk on canned Kirin Ichiban

& sang *The Little Mermaid* soundtrack  
on the same roof to a pilled-out audience  
until the sun came up  
& we drifted towards our subway stations,  
too empty to try to sleep together.  
I can tell you that I trained so hard that the pain  
woke me up in the middle of the night,  
a box fan blowing in hot street air as I crawled  
to the floor & hugged my knees.  
I can tell you that it makes sense to punch & be  
punched.  
I can tell you about taking a bus to see my dad  
after the chemotherapy,  
how he'd show me that he could squeeze pus out of  
his fingernails.  
How his body was bloated & hairless,  
unfamiliar.  
I can tell you how on the ride back  
the skyline gave me a flicker of clichéd hope  
until I walked into Port Authority to find my train  
home.  
I can tell you all of this now because I'm on a plane  
to a small Midwestern town  
& I'm afraid I might forget.

# Not thinking about my mother in China

---

by Samantha Ten Eyck

My mother went to sleep in the continent  
of North America.  
She didn't roll over in foreign hotel sheets,  
& wonder where her family went.  
Her voice never pulsed through  
the receiver from Beijing  
& I didn't keep the punctured black mouth  
of the phone  
far from my ear.

I didn't sit in silence, cleaning my email  
inbox while she chatted about bird nest soup.  
My mind wasn't calm when she talked  
about the government calling her phone,  
or the dead people she saw  
in the house next door.

My voice didn't crack & tell her  
be careful. My thumb didn't push  
the red button on the sweaty phone.  
I didn't get up & walk like the dead might,  
into the kitchen to make some tea.  
I didn't rip the casing open  
like a trained animal,  
or plug the electric kettle  
into the stained outlet.

When the tea dripped down my throat  
like a hot IV  
I didn't pack the thought of her  
neatly into the box of tea bags.  
I didn't place this box  
on the top shelf to steep  
until she didn't come home.



# **Driving to Arizona**

by Samantha Ten Eyck

The Toyota Tercel lurched like a dying wolf,  
& the hula dancer on the dash screamed.  
My sister handed me the pipe shaped like a  
mushroom  
& asked me to take the wheel while she bashed  
the content of the cubbyhole around to find an  
orange Bic.  
I was 15 & terrified so she took the pipe from me &  
held  
it to her lips while I swerved to miss a dead cat.

The desert was getting nearer because I could taste  
the dry cactus flower air, but suddenly I was swim-  
ming  
in my sister's exhalation & to my young lungs  
the burnt weed smelled like destruction.

The wind outside sounded dark blue in my ears  
as Suzie exited towards the Denny's & pushed  
the pipe towards me. I took it, because I was old.  
A teacher once told me that I was conscientious  
& I had to look it up.

In the Denny's parking lot,  
the pipe rested awkwardly in my lips.  
My sister guided my fingers over the intricate  
system

of little holes & told me when to stop sucking in.  
I felt like a sick dragon & I blamed the fire on my  
sister,  
who laughed like some drunk flukey & shook the  
whole  
bastard car.

It started to rain because God hates us.  
I was so hungry I could have eaten a horse, so I  
demanded  
that Suzie take me into Denny's & buy me a cold  
drink.  
The fat waitress of doom asked us "what can I  
getcha?"  
We weren't ready to order, so her ass walked away  
like a sack of gravy.

My sister was grinning at me & I thought  
that weed did absolutely nothing for me, & I ripped  
the laminated menu right in half. Bo Bo does not do  
drugs.  
The waitress sauntered up again in her hand-dyed  
shoes.  
One day, I thought, she will feel what it's like to be  
loved.  
I ordered a soy burger with extra pickles & a Sprite.  
Suzie said, "See, you were just hungry."  
The doom waitress gave us our check & I burst  
into laughter.

Suzie took my hand & we headed back  
to our trusty Toyota. The cornstalk seat covers  
made me itchy, but I could transcend time & space  
in that little automobile.  
Si, soy un bandido.

The hula dancer nodded in agreement,  
& though she was burnt by the sun, she shook  
her hips for us as we made for the desert.

# The Accoutrements

---

by Robert Spiegel

This darkness has its own flavor,  
a way of sifting through everything  
that happened: each new baby

and all the accoutrements. Love and sky  
of no help. When they married, everything  
was pink and blue. First they were

her babies, then they were his babies.  
Finally the stars entered the house.  
You can watch them rise and fall.

No wonder it takes a life of song and folly.  
Sometimes you can hardly breathe your way  
in. Watching how it swells and fills the air.

By the time it was done, there wasn't much  
left—just a couple of nods while passing.

## About the authors

**Tunji Ajibade** is a Communications Consultant and Literary Administrator. He lives in Abuja, Nigeria. He has published short stories, dramas and children stories—many of which have either been nominated, or won national literary awards. His short stories have been serially published online, in newspapers and journals such as *Conte*, *Cyclamens*, and *Swords*, as well as *Untamed Ink*.

**David S. Atkinson** received his MFA in writing from the University of Nebraska. His stories have appeared in (and/or are soon to be appearing in) *Gray Sparrow*, *Children Churches and Daddies*, *Split Quarterly*, *Cannoli Pie*, *C4: The Chamber Four Lit Mag*, *Brave Blue Mice*, *Atticus Review*, and *Fine Lines*. His book reviews have appeared in *Gently Read Literature*, *The Rumpus*, and *All Things Pankish*. The web site dedicated to his writing can be found at [davidsatkinsonwriting.com](http://davidsatkinsonwriting.com). He currently serves as a reader for *Gray Sparrow* and in his non-literary time he works as a patent attorney in Denver.

**Daniel Aristi** was born in Spain in 1971—thus he is 40, and trying to get to grips with this fact. He has lived and worked in places such as Indonesia, Belgium, Bolivia and Bosnia, and is now in Botswana

with his wife, Reshma, and their daughter, little Ria. Daniel writes whenever Ria goes to sleep. His work is forthcoming in *The Mas Tequila Review* and *The Floorboard Review*.

**Neil Carpathios** is the author of three full-length poetry collections: *Playground of Flesh* (Main Street Rag Press), *At the Axis of Imponderables* (winner of the Quercus Review Press Book Award), and *Beyond the Bones* (FutureCycle Press). He teaches and is Coordinator of Creative Writing at Shawnee State University in Portsmouth, Ohio.

**Heather Elliott** recently completed her MFA in Creative Writing at Minnesota State University, Mankato. Currently she's back in her home state of Wisconsin, writing, adjusting to the world of work and plotting trips abroad.

**Samantha Ten Eyck** is an MFA student at Minnesota State University, Mankato. She studied screenwriting and creative writing at New York University, and is, lately, writing a lot of poetry.

**Abigail Grindle** graduated from Ball State University with a BA in Telecommunications. She likes to write fiction, read nonfiction, drink Dr. Pepper, and dance around like she's being electrocuted. You can read her most recent work in *Anatomy*, *(nano)Spector*, and *Prime Mincer*.

**Eliza Horn** is from Cincinnati, OH. She has recently driven across the country to attend Arizona State University's MFA program in fiction.

**Hairee Lee's** fiction appears or is forthcoming in *Medulla Review*, *Fractured West*, *Every Writer's*

*Resource*, and *Existere*. Born in Seoul and raised in Toronto, she earned her creative writing MFA at Emerson College. Before pursuing graduate studies, she taught high school chemistry in London.

**Christopher Linforth** is the editor of *The Anthem Guide to Short Fiction* (Anthem Press, 2011). He also has work published in *Denver Quarterly*, *Chicago Quarterly Review*, *Camas*, *RipRap*, *Permafrost*, and other literary journals. He maintains a website at [christopherlinforth.wordpress.com](http://christopherlinforth.wordpress.com).

**Ben Miller's** work has appeared in Best American Essays, and is forthcoming this fall in *The Southwest Review* and *The Normal School*. His awards include a creative writing fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts. *River Bend Album*, a collection of essays exploring the urban Midwest, is forthcoming from Lookout Books in 2012.

A native of southern Wisconsin, **Jason Newport** is pursuing an MFA in creative writing at the University of North Carolina Wilmington. His short fiction has appeared in *moonShine review*, *Zero Ducats*, *Constellation*, and *Potomac Review*. His nonfiction has appeared in *Chautauqua*. He is currently working on a novel.

**Tracy Hayes Odena** received a BA in English from Southern Illinois University and an MFA in fiction writing from Columbia College Chicago. Her work has appeared in *Hair Trigger 21*, *So to Speak: A Feminist Journal of Language and Art*, and *Gazelle Poets Anthology: Volume One*. She is obsessed with clotheslines and is currently on the billionth rewrite of her first novel, *Love's Laundry*. She lives in Illinois.

**Kate Ruebenson** graduated from Skidmore College in May 2011 with a BA in English Literature. She received honors on her senior capstone, a portfolio comprised of 20 pages of poetry. She has been published in *Hanging Loose Press* and *Vantage Point*. She has also participated in spoken word slams and readings at the Nuyorican Poet's Cafe, Brooklyn Academy of Music, The Poetry Society (The Poetry Cafe, London), and The Bowery Poetry Club. She is currently living in Oakland, California while tutoring with 826 Valencia and applying to MFA programs in poetry.

**Derold Sligh** currently lives in the Detroit Metro area. He just recently returned to the U.S. from a year in Seoul, South Korea. He received a BA and MA from Central Michigan University and an MFA from San Diego State University. His collection of poems, titled *American Still Life*, was published in 2010 by Pudding House Press. His poetry has appeared in journals such as *American Poetry Journal*, *Mythium*, *Konundrum Engine*, *Status Hat*, and *Central Review*. He has taught creative writing workshops for San Diego State University, Gear Up and King/Chavez/Parks and was also a guest poet at the Theodore Roethke Memorial where he ran a workshop for African American fathers and sons.

**Ron Spalletta** is the recipient of a professional development grant from the Massachusetts Cultural Council and is a founding member of the Kitchen Table Poets in Boston, Massachusetts. He has previously been published in *Slate* and has been an author on papers in *Fire Technology* and the *Polish Journal of Microbiology*.

**Robert Spiegel** is a journalist who lives in New Mexico with kids who come and go and a border



collie who stays. As well as writing poems, stories and plays, he has learned how to write about himself in third person. Sometimes he thinks he's clever, but that passes fairly quickly. He's not.

Airship ZPG-2 flew the last mission of the Navy's lighter-than-air dirigible program the day **Ed Tato** was born. *Felix The Cat and Friends*, hosted by "Uncle Fred" Scott, broadcast for the last time, and pitcher Mutt Wilson died that same curious day. Ed's been mourning ever since.

**Joyce Tomlinson** lives at the foot of the Cascade Mountains in Snoqualmie, Washington with her husband Gary and two dogs. After raising four kids she went back to school and earned her BA in Arts & Literature at Antioch University Seattle. In January she'll enter the MFA program in Creative Non-Fiction at Pacific University in Oregon.

After growing up in Oakland and studying literature in Portland, **Joshua Willey** moved to China and commenced working a perennial series of day jobs. He's currently shopping a novel about homelessness, and writing a novel about home.

**David Williamson** works in the shipping industry and lives with his wife and son in Virginia Beach. He holds an MFA in fiction from Old Dominion University and has served on the editorial staff for *The Florida Review* and *The Barely South Review*. His screenplay *Colby* won the 2010 Virginia Screenwriting Competition. David is currently working on his first novel for middle grade readers.

# About the publisher

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